

VIDEOGAME CULTURE
MARCH 2010
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CRYSIS2
CRYTEK TEARS UP NEW YORK ON PLAYSTATION 3, XBOX 360 AND PC
RED DEAD REDEMPTION
HOW ROCKSTAR'S PIONEER SPIRIT IS GIVING NEW LIFE TO THE OLD WEST
WORLD OF WARCRAFT
BLIZZARD REVEALS THE SECRETS BEHIND THE GAME OF THE DECADE
REVIEWED
DANTE'S INFERNO
MASS EFFECT 2
HEAVY RAIN
BIOSHOCK 2
OFF DUTY





When *Far Cry* arrived in 2004, it felt like a holiday from the muddy brown and gunmetal-grey places in which we'd become accustomed to being deployed in firstperson shooters. Granted, as a vacation destination it wasn't exactly perfect, since you were never far from suffering the inconvenience of being shot in the head by mercenaries patrolling its crystal waters in patrol boats, or possibly eviscerated by hordes of genetic freaks cooked up by a resident mad scientist, but it beats Ibiza. With robust FPS mechanics and a sprinkling of innovations including dynamic stealth and binocular-based gadgetry, and with the entire experience brought to stirring life by potent new 3D tech, the game was quite some debut for Crytek. The studio's next title, *Crysis*, was even more visually striking, but its processing demands ensured that it was marginalised, enjoyed in its optimal form only by owners of the meatiest PC rigs. Crytek's work deserves a broader audience, which is where *Crysis 2* comes in.

A PC, Xbox 360 and PS3 production – developed in concert, while simultaneously aiming to set new visual standards on each platform – Crytek's FPS sequel is turning its back on the naturalistic environments with which the studio made its name, and relocating to New York. Needless to say, however, this particular vision of the Big Apple isn't the picture-postcard version, and on p46 we set about discovering what Crytek is bringing to the city.

In issue 210 we presented our games of 2000–2009, and we've laid out a plan to take a look at them in more detail, beginning this issue on p66 with an extended examination of the big winner, *World Of Warcraft*, which concludes with an interview with Rob Pardo, executive vice president of design at Blizzard. Look out for more on the other games of the decade in coming issues.

In the meantime, some other things to highlight from this issue: our interview with two of the men resurrecting a Nintendo 64 classic on Xbox 360 (p8), a trek into the wild west to see how Rockstar's *Red Dead Redemption* is shaping up (p56), and Steve Jackson's meeting with the gaming world's most prolific designer (p80).



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Future Publishing, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath, BA1 2BW
Telephone: +44 (0)1225 442244
Fax: +44 (0)1225 732275
Email: edge@futurenet.com
Edge website: www.edge-online.com

PEOPLE ON EDGE
Tony Mott editor-in-chief
Alex Wiltshire online editor
Ian Evenden production editor
Richard Stanton features editor
Christophe Kagotani Tokyo bureau
Darren Phillips art editor
Andrew Hind deputy art editor

CONTRIBUTORS
Matthew Castle, Mike Channell, N'Gai Croal, Martin Davies, Christian Donlan, Jenny Haddington, Tim Hardwick, Duncan Harris, Phil Haycraft, Leon Hurley, Steve Jackson, Jon Jordan, Simon Parkin, Steven Poole, Quintin Smith, Randy Smith, Rory Smith, Terry Stokes

ADVERTISING
Jas Rai advertising manager
Guy Jackson sales executive
Poorvi Smith advertising director
Advertising phone 0207 042 4219

Ian Miller group art director
Robin Abbott creative director
Matthew Williams design director
Jim Douglas editorial director

ADVERTISING
Jas Rai advertising manager
Guy Jackson sales executive
Poorvi Smith advertising director
Advertising phone 0207 042 4219

MARKETING
Tom Acton marketing campaign manager
James Kick brand marketing manager
Esther Gardiner promotions executive

CIRCULATION
Stuart Agnew trade marketing manager
Matt Cooper trade marketing executive
Rachael Cock trade marketing director
John Lawton international account manager
(john.lawton@futurenet.com)

PRINT & PRODUCTION
Frances Twentyman production co-ordinator
Rose Griffiths production manager
Richard Mason head of production
Colin Polis Future Plus buyer

LICENSING
Tim Hudson head of international licensing

FUTURE PUBLISHING LIMITED
James Binns publishing director
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Chief Executive: Stevie Spring
Non-executive Chairman: Roger Parry
Group Finance Director: John Bowman
Tel +44 (0)20 7042 4000 (London)
Tel +44 (0)1225 442244 (Bath)

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CONTENTS

MARCH

This month

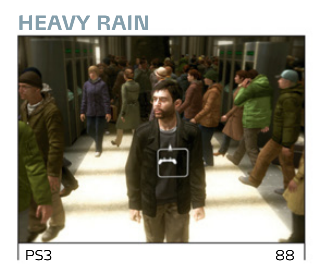
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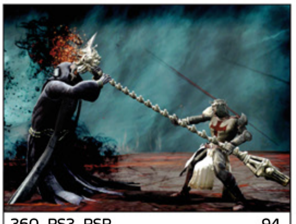


CONTENTS
CONTINUED

Hype

Review





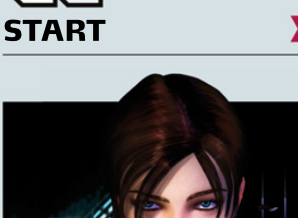






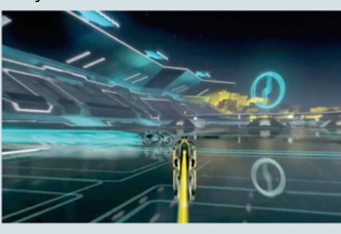
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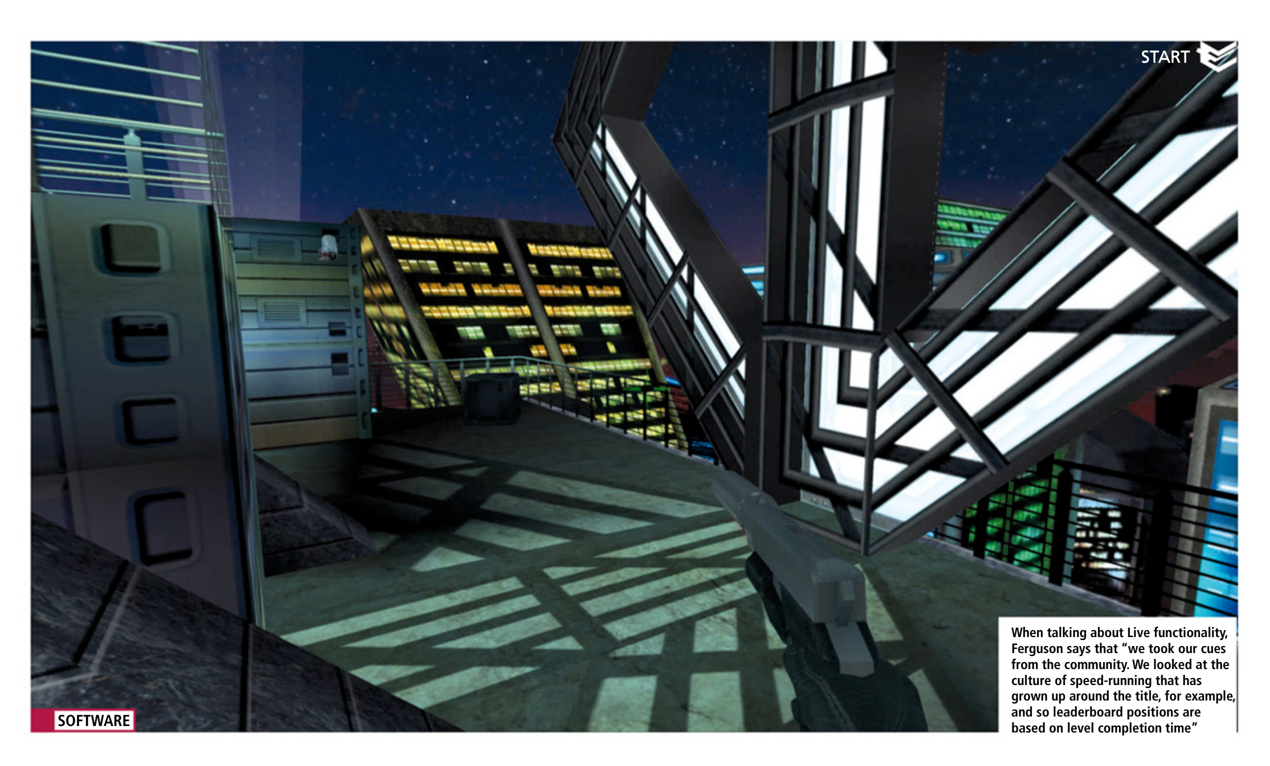









START



SOFTWARE

When talking about Live functionality, Ferguson says that "we took our cues from the community. We looked at the culture of speed-running that has grown up around the title, for example, and so leaderboard positions are based on level completion time"

New light dawns on Perfect Dark

As remakes and remasters become staples of console downloads, we look at one game that desperately needed the treatment – and how Microsoft and 4J Studios is making it happen

We've got experience with *Perfect Dark*, and not of the late-nights-in-2000 variety. Our return visit last year made it clear that, in making the N64 hardware creak with exertion, Rare created something wonderful that aged like a dog. 'For a classic multiplayer game, *Perfect Dark* suffers from a fairly major fault,' began issue 197's Time Extend. 'It's nigh-on unplayable.' Ouch.

Where do you go from there? With downloadable titles now part of the furniture, and the increasing trend towards remakes and upgrades of older games making its presence felt, the answer is obvious. What's behind this popularity is a different angle on the same desire from players and publishers. Gamers get a classic from the old days made more palatable to modern tastes, a far cry from stuffing your cupboard full of old consoles that look crappy on that HD screen; publishers get to test the waters for an old brand, safe in the knowledge it will pull in the nostalgia coin at the same time as it tests the viability of the franchise for what may be a full-scale comeback. It's a win-win situation in a risky industry.

There's more to this phenomenon, however, and *Perfect Dark* is the best example we've yet seen. In what was, until recently, an overwhelmingly technology-led industry, obsolescence comes as standard. It's easy to smile at *Mega Man 9*'s chip tunes, but their deliberate nodding to the olden days when the grass was green and 8bit consoles ruled the plains, to say nothing of the current vogue for all things videogame retro, reveals a medium self-conscious about its past. In this context, the remaking of a game in any manner becomes an act of reclaiming. An indication, in other words, of the medium's maturity.

It's hard to think of a game that deserves the treatment more than *Perfect Dark*. It was an FPS of ideas, crammed with content and different ways to play, which effortlessly superseded what had gone before on consoles. Now, Nintendo's 64bit console is a memory, but even at the time of *Perfect Dark*'s release the machine was in its twilight years, potential players distracted by the newly emerging Dreamcast, PS2 and Xbox.

"The only negative comment in reviews of the original concerned the low framerate. PD certainly benefits more from the move to 60fps than any other aspect of the HD makeover"

Which makes it all the more impressive that *Perfect Dark* shifted 2.5m copies, though it goes some way to explaining the drop-off from *GoldenEye*'s eight million. "I thought it was an absolutely stunning piece of work," says **Nick Ferguson**, producer of the *Perfect Dark* Xbox 360 reboot at Microsoft. "I was a keen PC gamer at the time, and even though I had played through *Half-Life* multiple times and was addicted to *Counter-Strike,* I felt *PD* had pushed the FPS genre even further. The weapons were inventive and the game felt modern and stylish… *PD* was so staggeringly ambitious, how could you not love it?"

We'll come back to that. First, let's get our terminology right: Ferguson explains that *PD* XBLA is "a remastering rather than a remake. It really is the original N64 game running under the hood. In my mind there was a very clear goal: we had to be the Criterion Collection version of a classic movie, rather than the Hollywood remake." Tasked with the job was 4J Studios, previously responsible for Rare's *Banjo-Kazooie* and *Tooie* finding their way to XBLA. It was contracted to begin work in January 2009. "The first thing you notice now," says **David Keningale**, lead artist at 4J, "is the fact that Rare had actually pushed the console beyond its limits. The framerate is atrocious and really got in the way of enjoying the game." Ferguson began the project by reviewing *PD*'s contemporary reception, and this was the only real bone of contention. "The only negative comments concerned the low framerate," he says. "*PD* certainly benefits more from the move to 60fps than any other aspect of the HD makeover."

As for the shiny side of things, Keningale says that "we look at what Rare was trying to achieve in the original models and textures, and try to replicate that with hi-res poly counts and textures." In some cases, the additional detail allowed the team to create weapons closer to the game's original vision. "The organic nature of the Maian weapons springs to mind," says Ferguson. In other



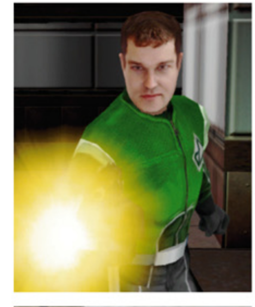


The old and new, side by side (above). "On a technical level, I'm still amazed at what Rare managed to fit into a 32MB [256Mbit] ROM," says Ferguson. "It's a massive game and has definitely got to be up there with modern triple-A retail titles in terms of scope." Keningale echoes this almost word for word, adding his astonishment at the sheer volume of assets squeezed on to the original cart

words, minor redesigns where necessary but faithful to the end – to a sometimes startling extent. 4J started with 90GB of source files, what Keningale describes as "disk dumps of each artist and coder's individual machines". Almost all of these had to be extracted and converted from the original, outdated software used to create the data. That alone certainly lays to rest the idea that game remastering is an easy job – over 100 staff have worked on this project.

It's an area Ferguson steams into with little provocation: "4J have worked very hard to change very little… There were several areas where the easy option would have been to throw away whole sections of code and rewrite them in a manner more suited to the 360 and modern networking architectures." The point being that when you go down this road, your remaster is no longer *Perfect Dark*. It's a similar perspective to that of Japanese developers who remaster classic shooters for PS2 and 360 (see our article on the Japanese shooter scene in **E**151). It's all sensible, because there's a precedent for what happens when you fool around with a great piece of work. "'Han shot first' was at the forefront of my mind every time something came up that initially seemed like it would be an improvement," adds Ferguson, outlining a philosophy that extended as far as "leaving many of the original quirks intact, like the infamous shortcut on Skedar Ruins".

But *PD*'s an unusual case. In contrast to what had to be kept for authenticity, many aspects seem tailor-made for the modern environment. "It immediately struck me when revisiting multiplayer," says Ferguson, "that *Perfect Dark* was an Xbox Live game created before Live actually existed." There was the tracking of detailed multiplayer statistics, of course, but also the refinement of each match's results, with gongs for accuracy sitting easily alongside humorous awards like 'Mostly Harmless' (for more on the multiplayer, see 'Felicitous').




Our heroes in game mode: Nick Ferguson (top) of Microsoft and David Keningale (above) of 4J Studios. The latter's favourite feature is the laptop gun: "I still prefer that over every other weapon, especially deployed near a door in multiplayer." Ferguson's pick will be shared by many *PD* fans: "The system of mission objectives that change depending on difficulty remains a work of genius"

Intentions aside, how does it stand up? We'll judge according to Keningale's summary of the remaster's aims: "To update the original to give fans the game as they might have remembered it with rose-tinted glasses". In our hands, to our eyes, it's an amazing success. You can see in these screens the success of the visual update, and during our playtime the smooth 60fps doesn't drop a beat. There's a slightly glossy look to some environments, an inevitability in a project of this nature, and one that actually rather suits the clinical aesthetic. After toning down the twitchy default setting, it's clear how effectively the controls have been translated (see 'Control freaks'), and there are delightful touches like the original voice actors – many of whom were Rare associates and staff, whose work this time around is uncompressed.

The odd bit of cheek also translates well. The Felicity level is still to be found in the multiplayer menu, as well as several digitised faces from the development team (a nod to the original doing the same). The N64 game featured Shigeru Miyamoto as one of its guards, obviously not an option this time around, so Peter Molyneux is in his place. After completing your first mission, the little Achievement plink sounds: 'How's that for starters?'



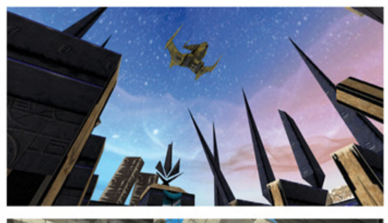
Control freaks

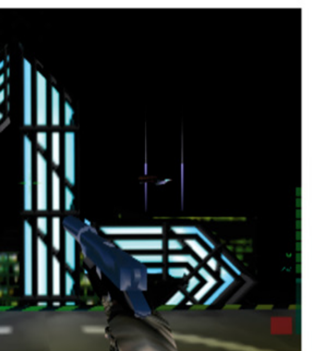
Biting the hand that feeds analogue overload

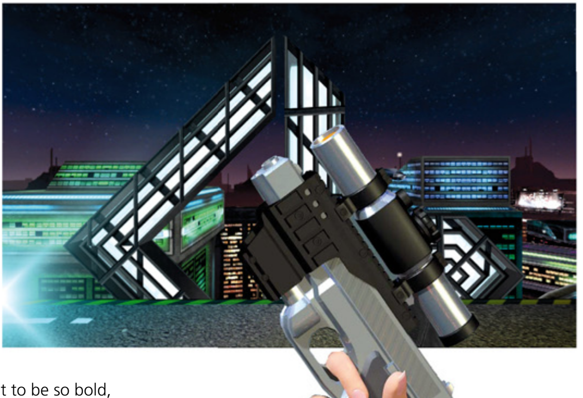
When Ferguson first returned to *Perfect Dark* with the knowledge he'd be producing the XBLA version, what was the first thing that hit him? "In all honesty I was most struck by the completely alien feel of the N64 controller when I booted it up." Translating a control scheme based on a tri-pronged controller with a single analogue stick to the many-buttoned dual-analogue 360 sticks was one of the project's biggest challenges. Ferguson: "The original, like all the best games, was built around the controller. The N64 A and B buttons and Z-trigger were quite ingeniously overloaded, so we've reduced that and [given] certain functions their own buttons: the 'Use' command toggles between fire modes and cycles backwards through weapons. We're aware that some button combos are hardwired into veteran *PD* players – for example, you can use A+X to detonate remote mines!" It works perfectly, and if you can't let go of *COD* or *Halo* you can use the options menu to switch to alternative schemes named 'Duty Calls' and 'Spartan'.



What charms await you in multiplayer rankings? We doubt they're staying zealously close to the original, but if they are then to become a Perfect Agent: spend a mere 12-and-a-half days (minimum) playing, kill 18,000 people, run 9,000 kilometres, win 900 games, bag 900 of each of four medals, and fire off 450,000 individual bullets. What Prestige?





The game has every right to be so bold, because *Perfect Dark* XBLA in concept may have been just a technical upgrade, but in reality it's much more than that. It completely resuscitates the game. What strikes you after all this time is how ahead of the curve Rare was. The new fluidity evinces the underlying structure's complexity: levels are locations rather than corridors, where you have different jobs to do, a certain freedom of approach, and a licence to explore.

We're not just being misty-eyed at an old friend. There's something verging on the emergent in the way that precisely the same environmental structure unfolds in relation to your different tactics. "Levels were designed more like real places than videogame levels, which gives locations an authentic feel," adds Ferguson. "And also means it can be easier to get lost!" Compared to the spoonfeeding of modern times – walk down beautifully rendered linear environment, shoot a few baddies, press X at glowing spot, watch something explode – it's something of a shock. Unsurprisingly, Ferguson "wouldn't knock *COD* or *Halo* and say that *PD* is better, but it certainly offers a unique experience compared to other shooters on the market today".

What strikes you after all this time is how ahead of the curve Rare was. The new fluidity evinces the underlying structure's complexity: there's a licence to explore

Why is this distinct from the other remakes and remasters doing the rounds nowadays? There are too many of them to provide a catch-all answer, but let's just say that none before has struck us quite like this one. There's obviously a distinction to be made between games that are prettied up – *COD Classic* or the recent *Serious Sam HD* – and those that are remade in their entirety from the ground up. This isn't the place for that, because *PD* is unique in sitting on just the wrong side of the technological curve. Perhaps to call the original 'unplayable' is exaggeration for dramatic effect, but there's truth there as well. And in talking about a 'remaster', we shouldn't be distracted by the thought of movies that just look a bit sharper when you buy them again. *Perfect Dark* XBLA isn't simply a cute nostalgia project or a bite-sized downloadable snack: it's the reclamation of a classic from time's graveyard. It's hard to remember just how good it was, but come this summer you certainly will. Now that's progress.



Felicitous

Retracing the trailblazing multiplayer elements of the original game

Perfect Dark **online – sounds perfect, right? Rare threw everything at the multiplayer mode, which supports up to four players and eight 'sims', and lets you set up matches as balanced or unfair as you wish. "It had an absolutely stunning range of features for a console shooter in 2000," says Ferguson, "and validating that functionality on Xbox 360 has required the largest test team we've ever assembled for an XBLA title."** ***PD*** **on XBLA ups the player count to eight (you can add four bots if you wish – we suggest four Molyneuxs as PeaceSims gathering up the weapons), and includes leaderboards, traditional matchmaking (which emphasises all of the gametypes) as well as straight-up combat, not forgetting custom games for those Farsight matches. There are also sensible additions – "lots of little things you don't need in an offline splitscreen game, like displaying Gamertags over players' heads," says Ferguson. "We also took advantage of HD resolutions to improve the readability of the radar screens in multiplayer." Jolly good. One-shot kills on Felicity all round.**



An early example of how difficulty changes things is the Carrington Villa. On Secret Agent, you have to save a hostage negotiator facing execution. On Perfect Agent, you're the negotiator – with a special laptop to hand. "When I started the level facing those guards on the pier I jumped in my seat," laughs Ferguson. "I was completely taken by surprise!"



INTERVIEW

Mist walkers

How an Amsterdam studio turned to digital delivery to give birth to a brave new world

In introducing their work to the masses, developers of original games face the sometimes difficult task of explaining elements such as storyline and mechanics, but Amsterdam's W!Games is looking at something broader – an entire game universe, in fact. The studio's next release, the XBLA, PSN and PC strategy game *Greed Corp*, will introduce Mistbound, a setting that it plans to use as the backdrop for a series of games. Importantly, these titles won't necessarily be of the same style – the turn-based *Greed Corp* will be followed by *Gunstorm*, an all-action shooter, for instance.

It's all quite a departure from W!Games' first title, *My Horse & Me*, which the studio produced for PC and Wii, but the Mistbound concept had been in existence before the art team even began sizing up the task of creating an equine experience. In the intervening period, enough pieces of concept artwork have been produced to wallpaper the interior of a country mansion – and it's terrific stuff. Importantly, it carries over in a convincing manner to the games themselves.

To find out more about the Mistbound universe, the first games that will explore it, and how it may evolve in the future, we talked to W!Games' marketing manager **Marco van Haren** and creative director **Marcel du Long**.



Why did you decide to launch the Mistbound universe via *Greed Corp*, a strategy game?

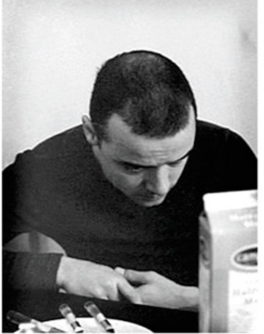
Marco Van Haren: The core gameplay mechanics of *Greed Corp* are a direct translation of the core aspects of the Mistbound universe. We never actually had a strategy game in mind from the start, it's just what we ended up with. When the world of Mistbound was sketched out, we started to think about gameplay mechanics that would directly communicate the essence of the Mistbound universe. Since it will serve as a setting for multiple games, it's important that the core of the universe is compelling and coherent. Converting that into core gameplay mechanics allowed us to really focus on getting the essence of the universe right.

At first, for instance, Mistbound contained only three factions. This caused some issues during the development of *Greed Corp*, and we had some characters that didn't really belong anywhere, so a fourth faction was created and integrated within the universe. After several iterations, we reached a point where the universe felt solid and all the basic aspects were finalised. The world and its locations, the factions with their individual histories, noteworthy events, and the timeline – all of these things were fleshed out on a level that allowed consistent application in future projects.

Gunstorm, the game we'll release after *Greed Corp*, is a top-down shooter, focusing on certain areas within the world and only two of the four factions. It would have been a lot more difficult to achieve the same depth and coherence within the universe if we had started with this game instead of *Greed Corp*.

You've obviously put a lot of time and energy into creating the Mistbound universe, but how far do your ambitions for it extend?







From left: Marco van Haren (marketing manager), Marcel du Long (creative director) and Nikki Kuppens, game designer on *Greed Corp*, the first Mistbound release. The turn-based strategy title is due out soon on PC, PS3 via PlayStation Network, and Xbox Live Arcade

Newswire



Sales drop for House of Mario in 2009

Nintendo has reported its results for the first three fiscal quarters of the current financial year – that is, the nine months from March 31, 2009 to December 31, 2009. It's sobering reading, mainly because, while the headlines concentrate on a relative drop in sales over the period, the results remain so strong. Nintendo pointed out that the figures represent "the third best corresponding performances in company history, but they all saw a decline from the previous year".

The results revealed income, not profit, but in terms of specifics you can pick out (corresponding 2008 results in brackets) Wii hardware sales of 17.05m (20.52m), Wii software sales of 156.64m (163.78m), DS hardware sales of 23.35m (25.62m), and, by some margin the biggest drop, DS software sales of 121.38m (163.78m).

The latter statistic represent the only drastic fall-off, and it's worth pointing out that Wii and DS lifetime hardware sales now stand at 67.45m and 125.13m respectively. For historical context, look no further than Nintendo's 8bit NES and Game Boy: the lifetime sales of those two systems were less than their current equivalents (NES sold 61.91m, Game Boy 118.69m). And even the most cynical industry watcher would have a hard time denying that Nintendo still has a lot to offer with its current lineup of hardware.





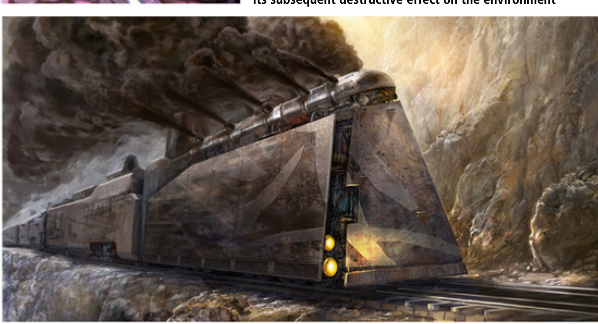


The colourful, carefully engineered *Greed Corps* (left) will introduce players to Mistbound, a fantasy world inspired by "the industrial revolutions of the 19th century and its subsequent destructive effect on the environment"











MVH: Yes, we've been working on the universe for quite some time, and the amount of detail created over the years is staggering. Thousands of pieces of concept art have been drawn, stories have been documented, magazines and newspapers within the universe have been made, and we even came up with a brand of tea, drank by one of the more prominent characters within Mistbound. We have many stories to tell within this world, and we have a lot of ideas on how to expand upon it. As long as people will enjoy discovering more about the universe and playing the games that take place within it, we will continue to work on it.

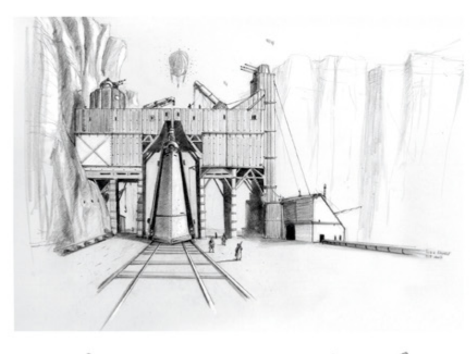
> **"Thousands of pieces of concept art have been drawn, magazines and newspapers within the universe have been made, and we even came up with a brand of tea"**

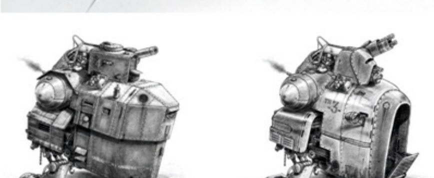
We really treat Mistbound as a separate project, which might grow into something bigger then a setting for downloadable games. For now our goal is to create two multiplatform games within the Mistbound universe each year. We're currently working on expanding the Mistbound website, to bring fans of the universe together and allow them to discover other games within it.

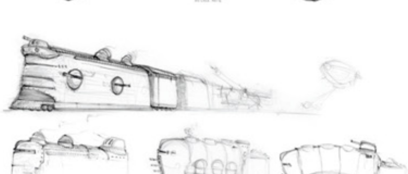
How will you communicate the scope of the universe from the launch of a strategy game, and how will you go on to reveal more over time?

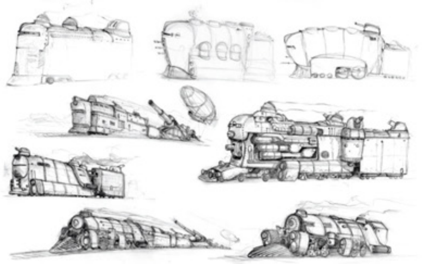
MVH: Being able to communicate the scope of Mistbound was definitely one of the reasons why we decided that the first game's gameplay should be a direct translation of the essence of that universe. When we now communicate things about *Greed Corp*, we always back that up with additional visuals and background information from Mistbound. Some time ago we revealed the walker unit by making an old-fashioned TV commercial in which the Empire faction promotes their new walker design. It's the walker used in *Greed Corp*, but the whole thing fits nicely into the world of Mistbound.

Having all these assets really helps us to communicate about a downloadable game on a level that is rarely possible, since downloadable games are almost never supported by a completely fleshed-out universe. And through *Greed Corp*, we also talk about the universe directly. For example, we released a trailer specifically to introduce the world, and we have several characters with their own online presence – some use Twitter or

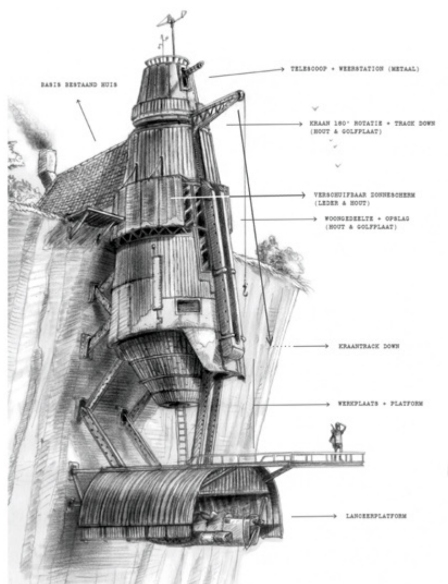


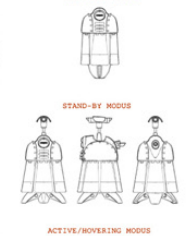


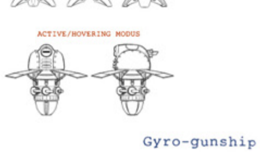


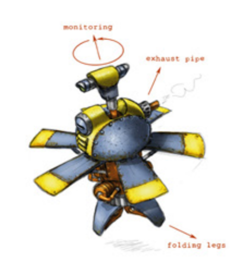


DETAIL KANGA HOUSE-12











Gyro-gunship





Flame Soldier







Bazooka Soldier

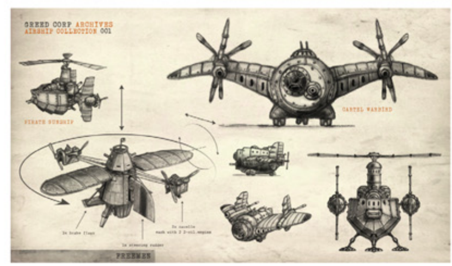


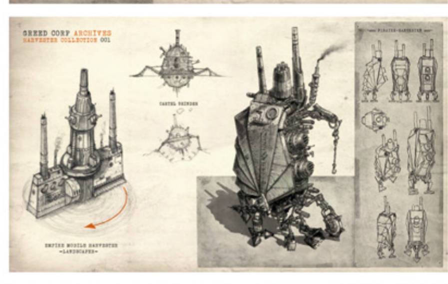






GREED CORP ARCHIVES
FREEMEN COLLECTION 002
HEADS
- MOUSE -
SCOUT UNIT
TOY BALL EXTERIOR



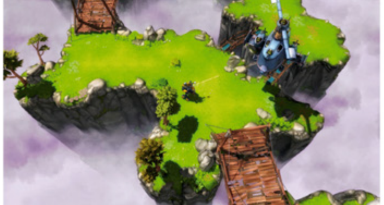














Elements of the Mistbound universe are naturally shared between *Greed Corp* (left) and *Gunstorm* (other shots), but the difference in presentation style gives the games their own personalities. We don't yet know which other genres will be explored in further Mistbound titles, but W!Games claims to not rule anything out

Facebook to talk about their daily lives and show things from within the world; others have their own themed blogs to elaborate on certain topics.

Even though we communicate on many different levels about the universe and our games, the Mistbound website [www.mistbound.com] will always be the main entry point for those who want to know more.

How do you think *Greed Corp* will fit into the strategy genre on PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360?
MVH: Strategy on consoles is not one of the biggest genres, and most of the games on offer are part of long-running franchises. As a studio we're well aware that releasing a strategy game is quite a commercial challenge, so with *Greed Corp* we tried to achieve both accessibility and depth. To do this we looked a lot at strategic board games, in which depth is created through tight mechanics and with a relatively small selection of units and options. All four factions have the exact same units and options, giving the game a chess-like strategic clarity. Each player has a certain amount of time before his turn ends, resulting in matches that usually last around 20 minutes with two players and under the hour with four players. Looking at other console strategy games, we're sure that *Greed Corp* is more than different and refreshing enough to offer strategy fans something new and enjoyable.

"We have several characters with their own online presence – some use Twitter or Facebook to talk about their daily lives and show things from within the world"

When it comes to the studio's future, do you think in terms of returning to producing boxed products, given that you've now embraced a different model?
MVH: We thought about it in two ways. What if we created about three or four downloadable games, then see if we get to a point with this universe that we can create a box with all of the games in it? It also depends on how your publishing deals in the future might work. On the other hand, how can we get the experience on an engine and IP level within the team so that at some point we can start making big games again?

The downloadable market will evolve like crazy. If you look at a game like *Shadow Complex* from a development perspective, it isn't much less work than a PlayStation 2 game, so there's a big shift: what is a downloadable game and what is a boxed game? I don't know how it'll be in four years. Maybe every retail game will also be downloadable. We have to find a way to make a product that's perceived by the market as being worth ten or 50 euros.

You've clearly created a lot of assets and you have various games tied to the IP so far, but how do you track all of the elements in the universe? Do you have one overarching resource that everyone has to be familiar with – a kind of bible?
Marcel du Long: We started with this IP long ago, even before W!Games started, so we created a concept document a couple of years ago featuring just the basics, but on top of that everyone has been brainstorming and drawing. But we've been discussing what our next step is in terms of making further documents – we're in the middle of the process right now.
MVH: We always feel free to change things within the IP. It shouldn't be confining – it should help and inspire us. It shouldn't be a prison.

OUT THERE



THAT'S JUST CRATE

A recent issue of Japanese gaming mag Famitsu featured some chat originating from Sega about none other than the most-anticipated least-likely sequel of all time, a title we're frequently accused of featuring on our next-issue page. We're talking, of course, about *Shenmue 3*. Ah, Ryo. His upcoming cameo in a certain racing game aside, he's been in limbo for so long that it's unlikely he even remembers what his dad looks like. Sega's perspective was the usual stuff about how it'd love to revisit the series but profitability remains a concern (for which read: it broke the bank). Then, the kicker: apparently, Sega would be happy to make the game as an exclusive if a platform holder funded its production. We have a funny feeling it won't happen, but go ahead: the internet petitions start over there.

SOUND BYTES

"We were showing that Grace doesn't care about her human body, only her avatar body. [The character] is a negative comment about people in our real world living too much in their avatars, meaning online and in videogames."
James Cameron. Another hero grows old

"Equipped with the legendary whip, players must locate upgradable weapons and holy water to fend off vampires and reach Dracula's layer in order to dethrone him once and for all."
Konami paints a painful end for the king of vampires

"Gentlemen, I have NO IDEA what this weapon is. I don't even know if I'll WANT it. But BY GOD, I know what's IMPORTANT, and it's that WE get it and the DEMOMAN DOES NOT."
The Soldier lays out the basics on the official Valve *Team Fortress 2* blog. And what do you know? The Soldiers did get the weapon

"We continue to beat the heck out of *Pro Evo*."
EA Europe president **Jens Uwe Intat** thumbs his nose at Konami. Come on, Seabass, you're not going to take that lying down, are you?

"I'm crap at it."
Poor **Ringo Starr**, facing up to the task of playing himself in *The Beatles: Rock Band*

"Those games they call 'PlayStation' are poison. Some games teach you to kill. They once put my face on a game: 'You've got to find Chavez to kill him'."
Venezuelan president **Hugo Chavez** gets on the high horse and starts rocking. He also thinks that good old Nintendo promotes "selfishness, individualism and violence"

"One of this year's many *God Of War* clones is *God Of War III*, in which Kratos will fight some really big creature by crawling around on its arm and presumably hitting its weak spot. There also seem to be skeletons involved."
Fidgit.com's **Tom Chick** is the droll of war

"'most official real life stand-ins in a video game' (Tomb RAider)
'Highest grossing computer game spin-off' (tomb raider)
'Most Successful live-action transfer" (tomB radier)'"
The **Guinness World Records 2010 Gamer's Edition's press office** gets a little tangled up when it comes to Lara



CONTEST

To Dare to dream

As the roll call for this year's Dare To Be Digital begins, we catch up with some of 2009's winners to discover how victory brings opportunities

Undergraduates looking to break into the videogame industry face a gruelling climb to the top of the CV pile. While the job market has expanded and created new angles of entry, such as through indie development, simply getting your vast stockpile of untapped talent noticed by employers or publishers is ever the problem. But one international competition has been the solution for a number of undergraduates every year since 1999. Dare To Be Digital sees teams of students descend upon Dundee's University of Abertay to conceptualise, prototype and test a game under the watchful eye of industry mentors. Fourteen teams of five students each were accepted into the competition last year, with three teams claiming the final prize. Although simply taking part is enough to nudge your CV up the ranks – underscoring practical experience and teamwork – winning can be transformative.

"If you told me three months ago that Yannis Mallat, the CEO of Ubisoft Toronto, would be giving me positive feedback on a game I made, I wouldn't have believed you"

"If you told me three months ago that Yannis Mallat, the CEO of Ubisoft Toronto, would be giving me positive feedback on a game I made, I wouldn't have believed you," says **Murray Sinclair**, team leader of Pixel Pirates, whose game *Colour Coded* was one of 2009's three winning entries. "As a result of winning Dare I've been nominated for the BAFTA Ones To Watch award. Who knows what further opportunities could come from that?"

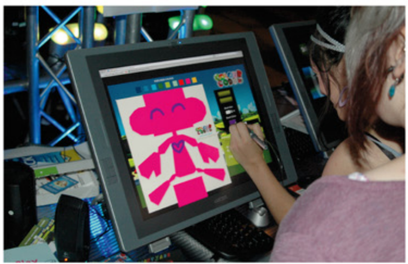
After the game received its public debut at the ProtoPlay event in Edinburgh, Sinclair's team was sought out by three publishers, leading to presentations and an offer to buy the IP. But the continuing fortunes of *Colour Coded*, which has also gone on to win Toronto's Vortex Gaming Competition, are a side note to the experience of Dare itself – bootstrapping undergraduates to the good practices, time pressures and QA processes that working in the industry involves.

"The competition primarily taught me about working realistically under time constraints and how to work well in a team," says **Andy Macdonald**, artist and team leader on *Shrunk*, a puzzle-platformer that snagged one of the other winning spots. "Initially we were going to have a lot more in it, including being hunted by a cat and being caught by our main villain, Dr Shockalot. There was going to be a boss battle at the end, but time constraints meant these had to be cut. It was a shame but it meant we could put more effort into the elements that did make it."

The competition is a several-stage process – candidates organise themselves in teams of five and submit a game concept through the



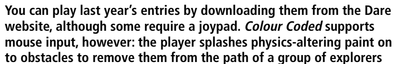
Quick As Thieves **is the most genre-bending of three winning titles from 2009. It's a score-attack game in which the aim is to steal museum artefacts, but greed is fraught with increased risk**







Smaller teams could build tighter mechanics if allowed a simpler remit, but the point of the competition is that it offers industry experience, regardless of the final games' quality



You can play last year's entries by downloading them from the Dare website, although some require a joypad. *Colour Coded* supports mouse input, however: the player splashes physics-altering paint on to obstacles to remove them from the path of a group of explorers



Shrunk sees the player reduced to the size of an eggcup, and forced to use scale-warping tools to puzzle their way from one side of the level to the other

competition's website. Although all contestants have to be students at either a university or art college, they don't necessarily have to be from the same one, or even from the same continent. Successful teams are then subjected to interview by a panel of industry professionals, and the concept is scrutinised under three criteria: innovation, use of technology and market potential. The teams that pass this stage are then given nine-and-a-half weeks to knock their game into a playable shape, each group receiving accommodation at Abertay itself and a budget of £200 on top of a personal £1,700 stipend.

"I was also part of a team who applied in 2008," says Sinclair. "Although we were unsuccessful, it gave me a better idea of what they were looking for when judging the submissions. *Colour Coded* was a concept that we felt would be achievable within nine-and-a-half weeks. The core gameplay had to be straightforward and simple for all to grasp. We tried to remove any barriers that could prevent the game reaching as large a market as possible, keeping in mind that one of the criteria is market potential."

Getting the scale of your ambition right is key to having a workable game within this short time: *Lemmings*-like and with a splash of physics, *Colour Coded* was feature-complete by week six.

"Early on we wanted to establish a pipeline for getting content into the engine. Once we had this sorted, we had a better understanding of what would be feasible within our time constraints and what amount of content we could create. We settled on making one level with nine puzzles, aiming to give ten minutes of play – if we completed this early then we could always add more content at the polishing stage. By week six, most of the teams had managed to build a playable level which was then focus-tested by a group of kids. We still had time to make changes and implement the feedback at this stage, and this had a large impact on how the final game played."

Finally, the games were put on public trial at ProtoPlay. Held during the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, ProtoPlay attracts thousands of people: an intimidating level of exposure perhaps, but the results have propelled Sinclair across the Atlantic, where he is in talks to found his own indie studio. Other winners, like Macdonald, have chosen to head back to university to complete their degrees, but all are in contention for the newly minted BAFTA Ones To Watch award, to be announced at this year's ProtoPlay in August.

Another date to bear in mind: the concept submission round for 2010 ends on March 28, so hopefuls looking to compete should get their skates on and head over to the official website (daretobedigital.com). Sinclair is quick to recommend the competition: "You get to make a game, meet great people and make contacts, and have a fantastic time doing it – what more could you want?" BAFTAs are all very well, it seems, but as far as the experience itself is concerned, who dares wins.





EVENT

Gear up for GDC

Storytelling and stoicism: the things to watch for at this year's Game Developers Conference

A weather vane of the industry's preoccupations, the lineup for 2010's GDC in San Francisco suggests restraint and rumination. 2008's conference buzzed with futurist brainstorming, laying down a path for the industry in enthusiastic hypotheticals. Last year saw the advent of recession, and ambitions for the medium were scaled back from artistic ascendancy to simple survival. This year sees few sessions willing to throw around the wild predictions of previous years, be they optimistic or pessimistic. Perhaps developers are wary of sticking their necks out again.







Photos: Vincent Diamante

Highlights from 2009 included a keynote from Nintendo president Satoru Iwata (left) and the Game Developers Choice Awards, in which Hideo Kojima (far left) picked up the Lifetime Achievement gong. *Passage* developer and 2009 IGF award winner Jason Rohrer (below) will return this year for a session entitled 'Seriously, Make YOUR Game!' which hopes to inspire independent development

Three of the most entertaining sideshows of past years return. The rapid-fire 'microtalks' promise their usual energy as ten speakers burn through 200 slides, while the 'yearly rant' invites the burning of bridges with its topic 'Fired and Fired-Up: Jobless Developers'. Then there's the design challenge, this time stipulating that the games must somehow involve the real death of a person

Even the post-mortems have a certain caution to them – usually a chance to trumpet success, the previous year's big titles have always tended to straddle multiple sessions, carpet-bombing all the tiers of development from audio design to asset pipelines. This year, the only title to go all guns on the lecture circuit is *Uncharted 2* – which has every reason for such extensive back-patting. Otherwise, the big titles of the last year are staying comparatively quiet. *Assassin's Creed II* turns up in the form of a lecture on large-scale production practices, while *Arkham Asylum* briefly shows its face in the visual arts track in 'Rebooting a Super Hero Video Game IP' – a lecture on the artistic challenge of compressing 70 years of Batman into a new hyper-real form.

Sid Meier tells us that the psychology of the player is more important than algebra, and lays out a development model in which egomania and paranoia are essential tools

But this lack of grandstanding is almost certainly to the benefit of the conference, allowing speakers to drill down to the most instructive facets or expose broad trends: the extreme example is Jaime Griesemer's lecture on the decision to introduce an extra 0.2 second delay to the firing rate of *Halo 3*'s sniper rifle; while elsewhere, online gaming veteran Gordon Walton (now at BioWare) takes a look at the first 25 years of MMOGs, and Rob Davis of Microsoft's Natal team examines the changing role of the designer.

Nonetheless, GDC promises some headline-grabbing with discussion centred on some of this year's biggest games – *God Of War III*, *APB*, *Splinter Cell: Conviction* and *Mass Effect 2* all make an appearance. The latter title, in a lecture perversely titled 'Get Your Game Out Of My Movie!' by BioWare's lead cinematic designer, Armando Troisi, is perhaps the most significant, since it has a keen focus on a resurging theme at the conference: narrative. Emboldened by *Uncharted 2*'s highly accomplished cutscene storytelling, industry opinion seems to have been reset back to 2008, when the fresh success of *BioShock* and *Portal* had everyone in a flap about narrative and how best to integrate it. There's a game-writing roundtable which hopes to thrash out best practices, a day-long tutorial session, a lecture on when and how to employ writers in the actual production process, and two other sessions on how to tell stories through the environment and architecture – one by Kaos Studios' Richard Rouse III, and another by Harvey Smith, of *Deus Ex* fame, and the prolific level design talent Matthias Worch, now at Visceral Games.

Yet all this talk of narrative has something of an antidote in Sid Meier's keynote. The master of the god game, a genre which strongly resists linear pre-authored narrative, tells us that the psychology of the player is more important than algebra as the foundation of game design, laying out a development model in which egomania and paranoia are essential tools. It seems a thoughtfully conservative pick for the leading spot, even if it comes with the exciting subtitle 'Everything You Know Is Wrong' – just the right keynote for a conference which seems to have ditched the glitz of 2008, shaken off the gloom of 2009, and got back to the real business of thinking hard about making games.



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

You know what? There just aren't enough games around nowadays. We jest, naturally, but finding enough cash to buy them all? That's a more serious issue. If you're still suffering a post-Christmas pinch, consider abandonware – games that, for various reasons, are available for free. After Home Of The Underdogs disappeared last year (it's back up, but not updated any more) we found Abandonware – The Official Ring. The name might bring to mind clunky old GeoCities, but there's no nonsense here, just a big collection of abandonware sites, frequent news updates about what's turned up lately, and pointers towards recently updated sites that review the games. If you've a spare weekend, give it a whirl.

Site:
Abandonware – The Official Ring
URL:
www.abandonwarering.com





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INTERVIEW

Top of the Props

We talk to the man leading Propaganda Games as the studio tackles two of Disney's biggest franchises



Propaganda currently has "about 200" employees, and marks a serious investment for Disney. "I can only say that any large entertainment company, unless they're asleep, has realised they need to be a big part of interactive entertainment," Tudge says

Apparently, **Dan Tudge** used to run a shop. We'd certainly buy a used car from him. Appointed by Disney as the vice president and general manager of internal studio Propaganda Games in April 2009, Tudge has previously been an executive producer and project director at BioWare, before which he ran his own studio, Exile Interactive. Here, he discusses his masterplan for Propaganda Games.

Why did you join Propaganda?
One of the things I found exciting was that this was a studio that had founded itself in 2005, gone through an incredible amount of roles, developed their first product, set up the structures to go forward, but really needed to take the next step. I love to create great RPGs, it's something I'm passionate about, but I also like to grow successful businesses, so as a challenge it was very exciting. And around when Propaganda started to ramp up and grow was the same time Exile was ramping down, so they hired a lot of my staff. I mean, I know those guys and they're friends of mine so I was always aware of what Propaganda was doing.

"We take consumer testing very seriously and we're lucky enough to have a very diverse community in Vancouver that we can draw upon to get consumers in and test"

What are your responsibilities?
The growth of the studio as well as both products [a new *Pirates Of The Caribbean* game and the Tron movie tie-in] and the direction we're taking on those. We have a range of game directors on both, so I work closely with them to make sure we're doing the best we can.

We understand that Propaganda's approach to focus testing is particularly exhaustive.
Yeah, at Propaganda we take consumer testing very seriously, and try to test right from the beginning. We have a beautiful in-house testing facility and we're lucky enough to have a very diverse community in Vancouver that we can draw upon to get consumers in and test. We do a lot of iterative testing, so we'll test and bring them back in, then again, every time improving and iterating so it gets better and better.

What do you think people associate with Propaganda Games at the moment?
I'm not sure what they think. In the sense that we're a very new studio, we've developed one title [2008's *Turok*], and I'm not sure the brand awareness is at that level where people form opinions. And for me that's my goal: to get the brand awareness up, where people do think about Propaganda and think about quality entertainment, and specifically quality action roleplaying games.

How tricky will it be to release two big games in one year?
Yeah, we're certainly swallowing two pigs at once! You know what, it's obviously not ideal, but that being said the timelines for the development were different so, even though they're arriving close to each other, that has allowed the development path to be quite different. And the fact that they're similar games, but in style are very different, has allowed us to put our strengths in the right area. So, while it may not be ideal, it is what it is and of course it's important we stay disciplined and make their dates.

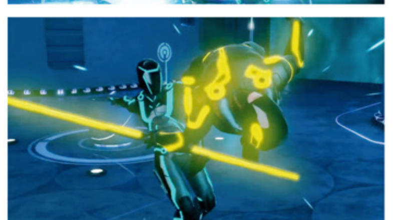




"Enjoying or liking something is a personal preference," Tudge says. "With *Pirates* [picture] it's its own thing and is being made by passionate developers of RPGs – that sets it apart in my mind"







Tudge on *Tron: Evolution*: "I suspect there are many films that haven't collaborated with the games, and all I can say is that Disney is different and we work closely with the filmmakers"

Continue



The Great Glut
The best start to a gaming year ever?

Xbox Live Indie Games
Had a look lately? And for mere pennies, too

BBC iPlayer
Intended for PCs; at home on consoles

Quit

Franchise surprises
"There might be another *God Of War* after *III*!"

Virtual Console
Not much quality lately. Come on, *EarthBound*

The time pinch
And now we get post-Christmas overload, too



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INCOMING

Dead Or Alive: Paradise
FORMAT: **PSP** PUBLISHER: **TECMO KOEI**



The handheld game's early art could be from any *DOA*, of course, as could the feature list: "Mingle, flirt, play, take snapshots". But so, remarkably enough, could the models. Behave yourselves

Batman: Arkham Asylum 2
FORMAT: **TBA** PUBLISHER: **WARNER BROS**



Hardly a surprise, but announced surprisingly quickly, the sequel to last year's cracker is set in the wider environs of Gotham City, though still shying away from going fully open world

Front Mission Evolved
FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**



The game that made fans weep at TGS sticks to its "first of a kind in the series" pitch – though hopefully not the kind of its maker's last game, *GI Joe*. Action men galore in the latest screens

Vanquish
FORMAT: **TBA** PUBLISHER: **TBA**



Honda meets *Halo* and *Crysis 2* to play *P.N.03*. Shinji Mikami's long-awaited project comes to light, the trailer's live action and CG says that, yes, you've seen it all before, but this time it's *white*

After Burner Climax
FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **SEGA**



Don't think we're handing out tens to any old 'climax action', Sega, even if we did enjoy PSP's *Black Falcon*. Finally confirmed for Live Arcade and PSN and awaiting that Euro release date

Hei$t
FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **CODEMASTERS**



Actually, one for Outgoing, this. Codemasters has put inXile's purse-snatching caper away for life, confirming that the project's been "terminated" while it focuses on "high quality titles"

Dead Rising 2
FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**



What better to show off weapon customisation than a paddlesaw, a sensible mix of – you can guess. It gives you twice the Prestige Points you'd normally get from the game's improvised arsenal

Lost Planet 2
FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**



What extreme conditions led to the 360 version featuring Marcus and Dom? "[Capcom] contacted us about a cameo and we said, 'Heck yeah'," explains *Gears Of War* designer Cliff Bleszinski

Tiger Woods PGA Tour Online
FORMAT: **MAC, PC** PUBLISHER: **EA**



Well, here's one marriage he hasn't screwed up. The browser-based sim entered open beta in January and seems set for release this year. First impressions: not quite as accessible as intended



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH
Fly Hard
tinyurl.com/flyhard

This will be old news to the many followers of edge-online.com's Twitter, but it's good enough to deserve a second airing here. *Fly Hard* delivers a vertically scrolling challenge in which you control a rocket and attempt to get it as high as possible, initially dodging helicopters and soon weaving in and out of UFOs, asteroids and satellites.

What makes *Fly Hard* great is the simple levelling system: after each day's flying you always have enough cash to buy a few new add-ons for your rocket, whether that's an extra fuel canister, improved steering or a big fat launch pad. Each one makes a noticeable difference to your capacity for flight, so every day you get a little farther and see something new.

The simple sustenance of a rising bank balance tallying with a rising height keeps you playing. Add to this a belting theme tune, and neat touches like the screen's zoom level changing relative to your total speed, and there's an excellent half hour's entertainment here. Bring on *Fly Harder*.







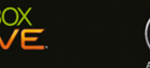



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Industry FOCUS

In association with Screen Digest

Peripherals as platforms

Piers Harding-Rolls examines the decline of the music game

The music game genre has had to endure a lot of negative press in recent weeks as its market has declined by 46 per cent in the US during the past year, falling from around $1.9bn in sales during 2008 to a little over $1bn in 2009 according to NPD. While this is a fairly steep and spectacular commercial collapse, it has prompted concerns that the sector's performance was a flash in the pan following a stellar couple of years. The year had started with great positivity for what had been a massive success story in both 2007 and 2008. At E3 2009, MTV Games had trumpeted the upcoming release of *The Beatles: Rock Band*, the first time the iconic group had licensed their music and brand in such a fashion, and expectation for *Guitar Hero 5* and its various expansions remained perky. Unfortunately, these new releases of established franchises were unable to halt the slide in sales revenues connected to the sector.

So why has the music game market declined so much, prompting suggestions of a collapse in demand for the genre? A key reason for the extent of this decline is also the reason for its explosive growth earlier in this console generation and is largely connected to the sale of peripherals. Indeed, average sales prices (ASPs) for music games during 2007 and 2008 were so high following big releases of bundled versions of *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* that instead of the normally expected decline in ASPs across the high-definition consoles, averages were actually pushed up significantly – a reflection of the success of these peripheral-dependent games. Average sales prices in excess of $100 for both the band versions of *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* contributed to a massive $1.9bn being spent on music games in the US in 2008.

Average sales prices in excess of $100 for both the band versions of Guitar Hero and Rock Band contributed to a massive $1.9bn being spent on music games in the US in 2008

While demand for new music game content has also dropped off – perhaps due to over-exposure to a slew of new content releases for the same two franchises – the saturated market for peripherals, exacerbated by the macroeconomic malaise, has resulted in ASPs plummeting to more normal territories for unbundled games. Unfortunately this peripheral saturation is likely to remain more or less until we see a new generation of console platforms, which



More than 13 million copies of *Rock Band* titles have been sold, with more than $1 billion in total sales, and with over 1,000 DLC songs in its library



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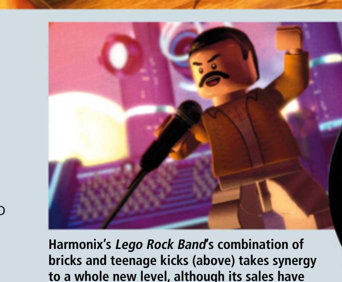




is bad news for the overall size of the music game market but not necessarily for publisher profitability, but more on that later.

This saturation will remain because established franchises *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* protect their position in the market by allowing existing peripherals to be used with new game releases. In so doing, Activision Blizzard and MTV Games are treating their peripherals as platforms and, like the console manufacturers, they market their products to what they consider to be an installed base of users. It is true that consumers that have invested in them are much more likely to pick up new games releases from the same franchises as a result. To completely overhaul peripherals and ask gamers to spend repeatedly at a high price point on the release of a new game would open the market up more significantly to competing products in the music game sectors. Additionally, only Activision Blizzard in this sector appears to be making material profits from peripherals. MTV Games has struggled to ensure a profitable return from its *Rock Band* peripherals so for it, at least, decreasing peripheral sales is no big loss.

With these two incumbent music game franchises well established this generation, it is highly unlikely that directly competing new IP with alternative peripherals will be able to break into the market this cycle in any significant way. This means that ASPs will remain suppressed, in the rock-led sector especially. Whether new franchises in other music sectors can prop up these suppressed ASPs remains to be seen – Activision Blizzard's *DJ Hero* and turntable peripheral springs to mind, but sales have been a small percentage of *Guitar Hero*'s numbers. However, a window of opportunity will open with the advent of new console platforms in the 2013–2014 timescale, when gamers will once again be asked to invest in new peripherals to work with new devices. While a strong and entrenched brand will naturally be an advantage to both *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band*, other publishers that may seek to enter the market will be able to compete on a more level playing field as gamers once more go through the decision of which bundled music game to buy.



Harmonix's *Lego Rock Band*'s combination of bricks and teenage kicks (above) takes synergy to a whole new level, although its sales have not managed to top those of Neversoft's *Band Hero*, its nearest competitor in the tweenybopper market. It also supports *Rock Band*'s existing DLC

SOMETHING ABOUT Japan

How do the yoge bear it?

Christophe Kagotani looks at how the west's biggest releases fare in the Japanese marketplace



Lately, we've been hearing executives and producers chide Japanese gamers for their attitude to titles from overseas. The market's resistance to western products, be they consoles or games, is easily painted as narrow-mindedness and discrimination – and, although this accusation often hinges on an equally irrational stigmatisation of the Japanese as a nation intolerant of other races, there are some grounds for complaint.

We're made to be very conscious, as Japanese consumers, of the difference between a home-grown product and that from elsewhere. It may be no more jingoistic than similar UK designations like 'British beef' or 'world cinema', but the distinction here is perhaps more pervasive, flagging up music, films and games based on their foreign origin. We use the prefix 'yo' to point it out – 'yo' meaning 'overseas', deriving from the common syllable between toyo and seiyo, the seas of Japan and Europe. Walk into a record store and you'll find a corner for hou-gaku (Japanese or east Asian music) and a corner for yo-gaku (western music). In gaming, the term for foreign product is 'yoge' – the word used by Sony Computer Entertainment Japan in launching the first PlayStation to create an 'overseas' section in its catalogue.

While this is not so different from Europe, where shops make similar distinctions between, say, French and English films, over the years the term yoge has taken on negative connotations. I have often heard people demurring on a purchase, saying, "Well, this is a yoge." It is, in part, a hangover from the early days of home computing when Japanese technology was widely thought to be more reliable than western-developed equivalents. But if there is some level of mistrust when it comes to overseas titles, it didn't stop a game like *Modern Warfare 2* shifting 300,000 copies (not including those sold in import). And this, going by the conventional wisdom, is a game that should induce apathy in the Japanese gamer.

MW2 is a grim and gritty FPS featuring an armed conflict in a faraway place; there's an American soldier on the package, looking determined and noble. This should be the perfect recipe for culture shock and commercial failure in Japan

It's expensive at ¥8,000 (£55); it's a grim and gritty FPS featuring an armed conflict in some faraway place; there's an American soldier on the package, looking determined and noble. This should be the perfect recipe for culture shock and commercial failure. Yet it sold well beyond the small population of Japanese FPS lovers, meaning that consumers who usually spurn both the genre and the import scene picked up the game. It must be quite a puzzle to those who think the Japanese won't buy western products. *Uncharted 2* may have leapt from the shelves, but that had an appealing ¥5,800 (£40) price tag at a time when there was nothing much to do on the PS3. *MW2* had no such help, so why did it sell?

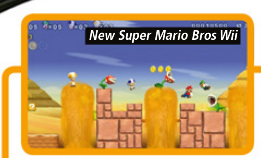
Certainly the Square Enix marketing machine helped, its name alone guaranteeing a level of quality assurance from an established Japanese name. But I also think those critics of the Japanese audience cherry-pick examples of western failure when in fact the Japanese have been shown to be perfectly curious about the blockbuster games from overseas. Whatever the cultural differences, *MW2* was a must-buy in the minds of Japanese gamers because of its phenomenal commercial success outside of Japan. It happened for *Halo* and *Gears Of War* and *Assassin's Creed II*. Other western titles may have bombed – but is this really so incomparable with how well the majority of

Japanese RPGs, mech games or shooters fare outside our borders? Mario may not have done too shabbily, but *Senko No Ronde* is still waiting to set the world alight.

I think it's a mistake to believe that Japanese gamers are opposed to western games per se. Of course there are matters of localisation and differing cultural tastes; the fact that Japanese gamers prefer JRPGs to western RPGs is not a matter of their origin so much as their style and familiarity. Gamers in Japan have been educated by home-grown developers to demand a particular kind of polished and guided experience. While we have our fair share of shoddily designed crap, the Japanese games thought of as being in the top tier have had huge amounts of money spent on ensuring a level of finesse that isn't necessarily always found in their western counterparts. Games here are developed using the 'vertical slice' method – you take one small part of the game and create it in its totality. The result is that, regardless of other flaws, Japanese games have a sheen to them that consumers here expect. Western games, meanwhile, are developed by doing the groundwork for the entire game first, and then adding to it until you run out of time. Ezio would never clip through a wall if *Assassin's Creed II* had been made in Japan – but he probably wouldn't have left Florence, either.

Companies who criticise Japanese gamers for their insularity may have special interests in the partnerships they have with overseas' developers. They may also desire a more unified market – which is quite reasonable, given that having to concentrate on domestic sales to the exclusion of the west is often blamed for the decline of Japanese development. But, equally, western developers could do more to localise their products for the Japanese market – I'm often asked to evaluate games before their release in Japan, and it's almost always a matter of lip-service; it's too late and too costly to change anything for what is considered a relatively insignificant region. Asking Japanese gamers to man up and consume when the developers have not met them halfway seems curiously naïve about how the free market works.

But for now, I hope those many gamers who bought *MW2* enjoyed it and felt rewarded for the gamble they took. Perhaps they have the taste for it now, and will look back over the last generation and root out the many high-quality western games which have so far mostly passed unnoticed in Japan. The yoge may yet have its day.


New Super Mario Bros Wii


Biohazard Darkside Chronicles

Mediacreate Japanese sales: January 18-24

Game/monthly sales

1. ***New Super Mario Brothers*** (Nintendo, Wii): 110,918
2. ***Senjo No Valkyria 2*** (Sega, PSP): 94,444
3. ***Maho Shojo Lyrical Nanoha A's Portable*** (BNG, PSP): 76,088
4. ***Kingdom Hearts Birth by Sleep*** (Square Enix, PSP): 59,566
5. ***Tomodachi Collection*** (Nintendo, DS): 45,002
6. ***Wii Fit Plus*** (Nintendo, Wii): 33,640
7. ***Biohazard Darkside Chronicles*** (Capcom, Wii): 23,245
8. ***Monster Hunter Portable 2nd G PSP The Best*** (Capcom, PSP): 16,117
9. ***Wii Sports Resort*** (Nintendo, Wii): 15,753
10. ***Inazuma Eleven 2*** (Level-5, DS): 13,951

You become large and jump up on the roof. You are inside the flower and roll around. The lift is going up. Then it's bouncing down and grows bigger so you can't fly with it. Five balloons hit you and the coins fall down. The green bear is waiting for you. You jump on him and get one million points. You blow a soap bubble and the dragon gets stuck inside it. The princess is waiting for you. You shoot at the evil wizard in the castle with the bubble machine. The clock is ticking. You take the magic bike and fly to the top of the castle where the wizard awaits you. You beat him with the magic bubble machine. Now the princess is crying louder for help. Only three more seconds to save her. You eat your last mushroom, jump across the screen and kiss the princess. You gain five million points and move up one level.

Text sucks. Watch a trailer instead.





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Kane & Lynch 2: Dog Days



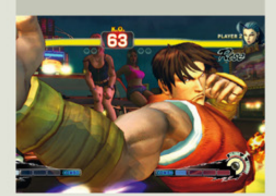
It's not quite enough to make us go back to check, but our excitement has us wondering whether the first was that mediocre, after all. We don't think IO will screw this up.
360, PS3, IO INTERACTIVE

Final Fantasy XIII



Came in at the last minute, and it's not the type of game you're going to rush. Opinions are split as to whether *XIII* is great or tedious, which has to be a good sign.
360, PS3, SQUARE ENIX

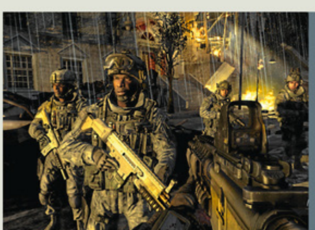
Super Street Fighter IV



Our secrecy is assured by threat of thumbscrews, but we noticed how all ears in the Edge office prick up when a rumour of a new character does the rounds. Dudley, eh?
ARCADE, 360, PC, PS3, CAPCOM

Delayed gratification

Is a release date ever a promise worth keeping?



Modern Warfare 2: run for the hills! After the rather panicky date-dodging of late last year, we wonder if publishers are now scheduling to avoid *MW3*? On a side note, new IP *Borderlands* did very well in the same release window, so perhaps the *MW2* effect was overstated

Sixty days. It's hard to imagine any videogame enjoying a gestation period between announcement and release anywhere near as brief as that of Apple's forthcoming iPad. Videogaming's marketing cycles are usually measured in years, not days, a journey marked by a protracted, often tedious, trickle of details and screenshots that shift with the changing of seasons and tastes ahead of release. As the ambition of videogames has expanded, so too has the typical development cycle. But unlike Apple, game developers seem unable to keep their projects a secret until the 11th hour, as if elongating the marketing process somehow increases their creations' potency.

One by-product of working within such gigantic timeframes is the potential for gigantic delays. Indeed, 2009 saw more videogames miss their proposed release dates than perhaps any year before it. Some put this down to the *Modern Warfare 2* effect, where publishers react to the market to ensure their title has the best possible chance to stand out. But in the case of titles like *Gran Turismo 5*, reputedly a $60m game whose development began in 2005, and whose delays have drawn an apology from Sony, it's harder to pinpoint the cause.

With increased scope comes increased risk, and where poor project management may have been reflected in a delay of a few weeks for games created a decade ago, nowadays even the smallest failings can result in months of slippage. So too has the financial risk shouldered by contemporary publishers increased in step with blockusters' ambition. Now, more than ever, it's crucial that a game enter the market in its best possible state for those who have financed it. If a few months' extra dev time can translate to a ten per cent bump in a title's Metacritic rating, most publishers are willing to let release dates pass them by.

From the player's perspective, are misleading release dates, such as the one recently communicated by Ubisoft for *Splinter Cell Conviction*, any more than white lies? Perhaps not. But, as Apple often demonstrates, there is no small amount of virtue in delivering on promises. Not only does it increase the impact of an announcement, but it also speaks of a company confident in the quality and readiness of its product.



FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCE**
DEVELOPER: **POLYPHONY DIGITAL**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBA**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E172**

Gran Turismo 5

It looks as good as ever, but Polyphony keeps applying polish

Evidence that, in spite of a seemingly interminable gestation, people are still salivating over the prospect of another instalment of *Gran Turismo* arrived last month when it was revealed that, in the space of three weeks, the latest demo for the game was downloaded a million times in the European and Australasian regions. *Gran Turismo* fans, it seems, are suffering from Stockholm Syndrome – the more they are held at arm's length by an intensely private and largely unhurried development team, the more slavishly devoted to the church of Polyphony they become.

Those who doubt the contemporary relevance of Kazunori Yamauchi's deeply personal ode to the combustion engine can be forgiven for failing to understand why players return to the format of glacial car accumulation and mandatory tuning. While those two elements of the *Gran Turismo* experience will no doubt remain, one of the topics Sony has steered clear of so far is the structure of the career mode. There are no doubt concerns that, having utterly misread the requirements of a handheld title with *Gran Turismo PSP*, Polyphony will be similarly out of touch with players in this generation of home consoles. To abandon all hope would be foolish, though – the inclusion of licensed championships and glimpses of real motorsport personalities during the various teasers imply that the career mode is a more varied and less sterile affair this time.







For all ***Forza***'s brilliance and ***Dirt 2***'s noisy aesthetic, there is still an unassailable crispness to ***Gran Turismo***'s visuals. Whether ***GT5***'s atmosphere can match the fidelity, particularly on more open circuits, is another matter entirely



With *GT5*'s online mode still largely secret, and the series barely having ventured into that sphere already, fan anticipation is at fever pitch. With so many vehicles on offer, hopefully races won't be dominated by a single fastest-in-class model

At the very least, the GT Academy demo proved that Yamauchi isn't totally opposed to sweeping change. The purpose of the demo was to introduce an overhauled physics system that has rendered the 'professional' mode handling almost unrecognisable in comparison to *GT: Prologue*. The crucial relationship between tyre and tarmac has been completely redefined, with loss of grip depicted far more realistically. As a result, vehicles are now far more lively, washing out dramatically when forced to the point of understeer and punishing those who are unduly enthusiastic with their right foot with a vicious lash of oversteer. The demo itself was limited to the 'professional' driving model, which is designed to be brutally realistic, but if the changes are as noticeable in standard mode, there's a danger that the inexperienced racers the *Gran Turismo* series has done so well to entice over the years will genuinely struggle with deciphering the vastly more complex feedback from the vehicle. Perhaps the methodical climb from standard-issue hatchbacks to racing thoroughbreds will be a necessity rather than a chore in this edition.

> Vehicles are now far more lively, washing out dramatically when forced to the point of understeer and punishing those who are unduly enthusiastic with their right foot

Recently added to the list of licensed content is the IndyCar Series, which means *Gran Turismo 5* now contains the two top-tier motor-racing championships in the United States, NASCAR being the other. Neither licence sold particularly well as a standalone game, but as an injection of authenticity into *Gran Turismo*'s automotive fever dream, and gaining a sophisticated representation of their respective series in return, they will no doubt be welcomed to the fold. The Top Gear-esque fantasy spirit of the original games clearly remains a key element, however, with the recent



After repeated delays, *GT5* has the potential to severely interfere with the official WRC game. If fans of the sport are satisfied here, it could be catastrophic for Black Bean's title





With the now widely adopted photo mode returning and a new YouTube export feature for dramatic moments, expect to see social media sites flooded by excited car fans



Rendering every model, engine note and physics profile to the level of fidelity that has been achieved is some accomplishment. Will Polyphony chief Kazunori Yamauchi's desire to refine remain eternally unsatisfied?

announcement of richly detailed new street circuits in Rome and Madrid.

After an aborted attempt to bring online functionality to *Gran Turismo 4* and a purposefully skeletal offering in *Prologue*, the series' lack of a unified community appears even more stark in comparison to *Forza Motorsport 3*'s comprehensive network. Yamauchi has publicly cited this as an area that has been prioritised for improvement and, while he has been coy about the details, there will be support for private races, leagues and car clubs which have the potential to turn *Gran Turismo 5* into the staging area for one of the biggest active communities in gaming.

As is customary, *Gran Turismo 5* will come with a selection of novelty trinkets to augment the experience. The photo mode that was pioneered by the last full *GT* release, and which has since been adopted almost wholesale by the genre, triumphantly returns, but this time the still images will be saved out at a size equivalent to an eight-megapixel digital camera. The neglected PlayStation Eye peripheral will also be drafted in on face-detection duties to provide a basis for cockpit-view head-tracking, allowing players to glance toward the approaching apex of a corner before tackling it. Further blurring the line between reality and *GT*'s approximation, owners of a particular brand of in-car GPS, initially fitted to the Lexus IS-F, will be able to convert live track-day telemetry into a ghost car recording on certain circuits in the game, allowing them to accurately quantify the detrimental effect mortal terror has on laptime.

Gran Turismo 5 is almost guaranteed success, but in the context of a console war that Sony is no longer comfortably leading and after a five-year development cycle, unfavourable comparisons between this and Turn 10's pretender to the throne will be felt all the more sharply by the Japanese corporation. In spite of this, Yamauchi displays continued commitment to innovation in his own idiom – a constant reminder that *Forza Motorsport 3* is, for all its brilliance, ultimately a proficient emulation of *GT*'s past glories. *Gran Turismo 5* appears very much an old model with new parts, but those fresh elements combine a direct response to criticisms that have dogged the series for years with genuinely novel features that will most likely become standards within the genre. The framework may be long in the tooth, but console racing's elder statesman is no less important in its fifth incarnation.



Added depth

For the past year, specially modified editions of *Gran Turismo* that are natively compatible with the new generation of 3D TVs have been routinely paraded around various trade shows and tech fairs. No doubt it's been chosen as the game that will suffer least from interlacing, but could the title's recently announced delay be a result of increasing the prominence of the game's three-dimensional functionality? It's been said that Sony is considering repositioning PlayStation 3 as a 3D gaming system, and *Gran Turismo 5* would make an ideal flagship title.

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**
DEVELOPER: **AVALANCHE STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **SWEDEN**
RELEASE: **MARCH 26**

Just Cause 2

Rico's island-hopping shows us new ways to get the drop on our enemies

The original *Just Cause* was, like *Far Cry*, as much a tropical beach holiday as a game. Unfortunately, Swedish developer Avalanche perhaps took that ethos a little too much to heart – at times the game offered up crushingly tedious compulsory missions, and forcing yourself through them could feel like as much a period of self-imposed inactivity as two weeks in the Caribbean.

At certain points *Just Cause 2* looks in severe danger of reverting to type. For example, after a carefully crafted introduction, which capably introduces the game's core mechanics, the game dumps you on the Panau network of islands and requires you to accumulate 'chaos' – an arbitrary quantification of the missions you complete and the amount of destruction you wreak – in order to unlock the next story objective. After presenting a choice of structurally identical base assaults, targets for indiscriminate destruction and the de rigueur open-world vehicle races, the game finds its stride once more and injects a much-needed dose of variety to the mission structure. It remains to be seen how frequently the pace is artificially neutered in order to lengthen the experience, and whether what appears to be a largely inconsequential storyline is enough to carry players through the padding.

If the plot isn't intellectually arresting then at least the fictional archipelago that Avalanche has crafted can provide a salve for the eyes. The developer's proprietary engine manages the balance between relatively high visual fidelity in the immediate area surrounding the player and truly astonishing draw distances, to which only Asobo's offroad-racer-cum-tech-demo *Fuel* can compare. The terrain itself is far more varied than that of the previous title, too, with the game opening on a snow-capped peak and encompassing dense urban areas, lush rainforest and barren desert – all of which can be seen simultaneously from the appropriate altitude. There's some cunning streaming technology at work, the highly specialised way the engine has been optimised becoming evident when you attempt to 'fast' travel across the world and are subjected to a lengthy wait on the map screen as the game rebuilds the landscape.

> When Just Cause 2 builds a head of steam and maintains it for an hour or two, it becomes clear that Avalanche has learnt from criticisms of the original

Interestingly, there appears to have been a concerted effort to bring the wackiness of your playground in line with the main character's superhuman abilities. The shift in tone is most in evidence as you discover a nightclub suspended beneath a pair of (no doubt symbolic) dirigibles in one corner of the map, and we're particularly enamoured with a fully functional Cape Canaveral Air Force Station clone that plays a part in



Market forces

Throughout Rico's adventure, his accumulation of 'chaos' will unlock new items on a list of illicit goods to aid you in your revolutionary quest. These aren't essentials – you'll usually be well equipped for missions – but luxury trimmings for added amusement. Tossing out the black-market beacon calls down an airborne shop full of trinkets that no self-respecting mercenary would be seen without this season. For the most part you'll use the menu to fast travel between settlements, but very occasionally you'll recognise an objective that really deserves to be solved by calling in a prototype jet plane that would rival a Fabergé egg for both cost and fragility.

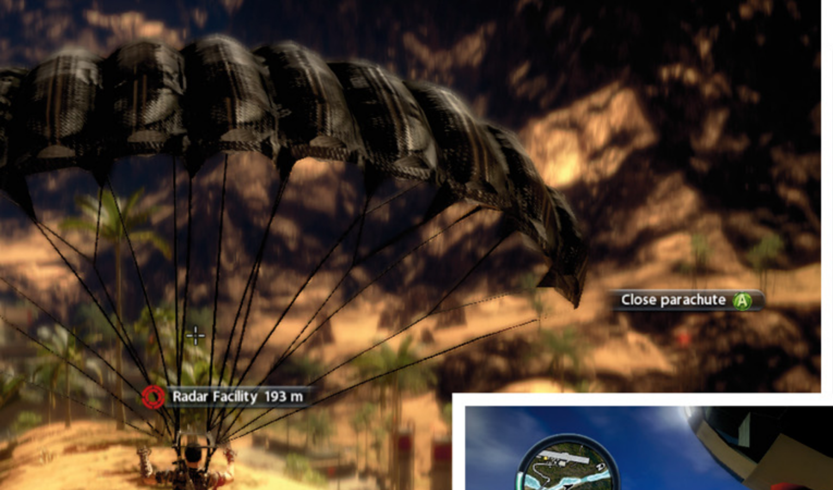


In a manoeuvre borrowed from the Master Chief, Rico can tear miniguns from their mounting and turn them on waves of foes. Infinite ammunition all but ensures you're the last man standing











Illustrated here, the finest possible use for the grapple's new tether ability: attaching a hapless guard to a gas canister and igniting it

one of the more interesting faction missions.

Rico himself, for the most part, controls excellently. The combination of grappling hook and parachute remains unique and, once basic proficiency has been earned, allows for a combination of graceful airborne movement over long distances and near-instantaneous dashes across short ones. Executed properly, Rico's method of movement is as satisfying as any of the interactive approximations of Spider-Man that have gone before. The new ability to tether objects to others using the grapple is perhaps less Earth-shattering an addition than Square Enix might suggest, but there is an undeniable thrill to be had catapulting pursuing Humvees over the edge of a bridge by attaching them to the uprights. We wish the game allowed a little more *Scribblenauts*-esque flexibility to fool around with the system, though: it refused to play ball when we attempted to tether the subject of an escort mission to our helicopter and airlift him to safety.

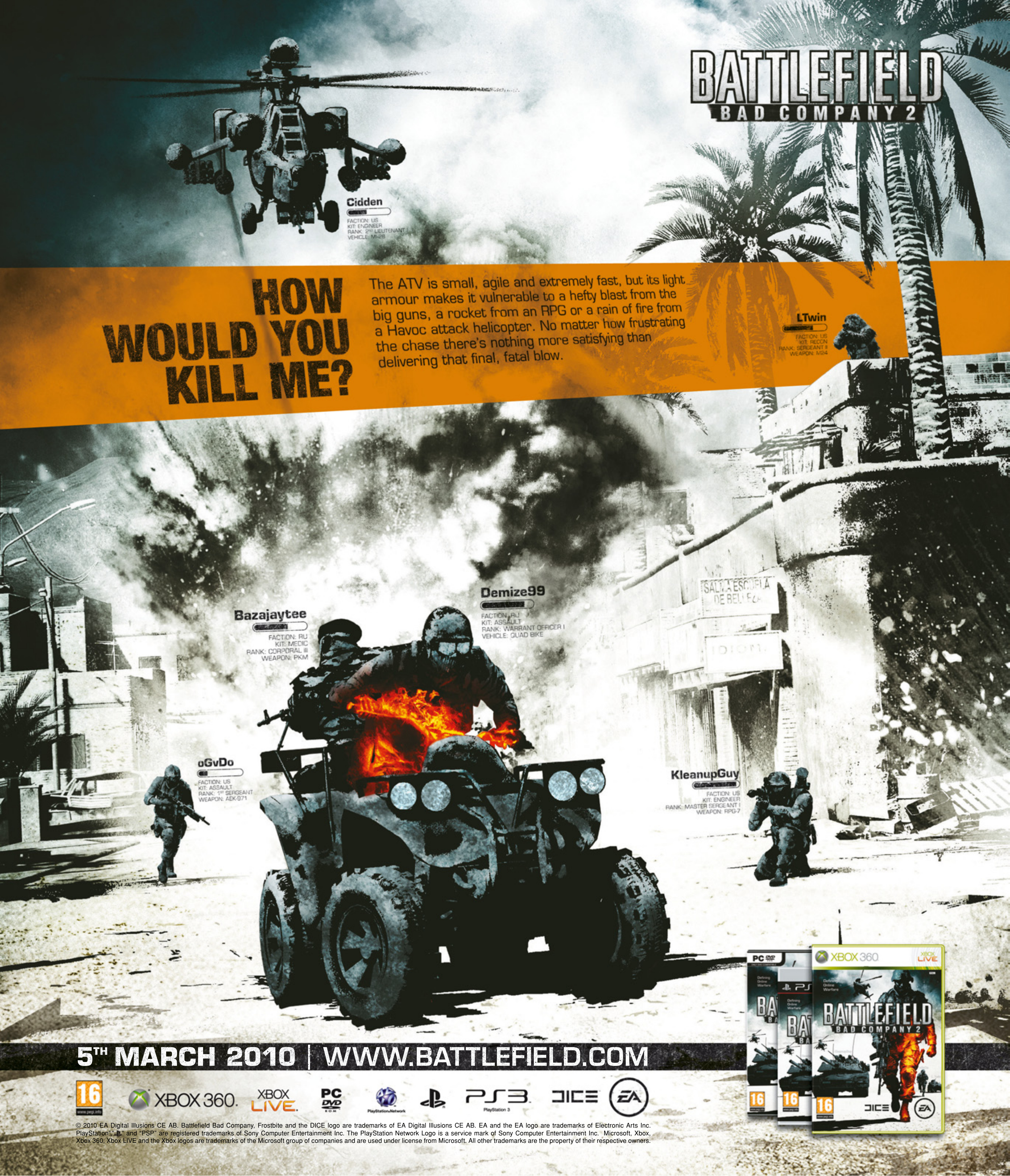
When *Just Cause 2*'s pace falters and the plot grinds to a halt, it has the potential to severely compromise a game that should be driven by action-movie momentum, and the apparent weakness of the storyline and the central cast of characters compounds the issue. For many, the names, ideals and motivation of the major 'personalities' in the conflict will no doubt blur into a single, fuzzy amalgam and offer very little inducement to plough through the more insubstantial portions of play. The other major concern is the lack of any incentive to wander off the beaten track: choose to visit areas that aren't directly implicated in the storyline and they reveal themselves to be staging areas, patiently awaiting their moment in the spotlight, rather than the cohesive elements of a living world.

That said, when *Just Cause 2* builds a head of steam and maintains it for an hour or two, it becomes clear that Avalanche has learnt from criticisms of the original and that there are some genuinely entertaining objectives to be completed during the core mission thread. Ultimately, the biggest question hanging over *Just Cause 2*, with only a month until release, is whether the game can imitate its protagonist and make a daring escape from its own inconsistency.

Vehicles benefit from accessible if slightly floaty handling. Naturally, if you want to persuade a limousine around a sharp corner, liberal use of the handbrake is recommended



Skydiving is still a primary method of getting around, particularly if you're frustrated by how difficult it is to coerce the helicopters into a dive


BATTLEFIELD
BAD COMPANY 2
Cidden
FACTION: US
KIT: ENGINEER
RANK: 2ND LIEUTENANT I
VEHICLE: MI-28
HOW WOULD YOU KILL ME?
The ATV is small, agile and extremely fast, but its light armour makes it vulnerable to a hefty blast from the big guns, a rocket from an RPG or a rain of fire from a Havoc attack helicopter. No matter how frustrating the chase there's nothing more satisfying than delivering that final, fatal blow.
LTwin
FACTION: US
KIT: RECON
RANK: SERGEANT II
WEAPON: M24
Demize99
FACTION: RU
KIT: ASSAULT
RANK: WARRANT OFFICER I
VEHICLE: QUAD BIKE
Bazajaytee
FACTION: RU
KIT: MEDIC
RANK: CORPORAL III
WEAPON: PKM
oGvDo
FACTION: US
KIT: ASSAULT
RANK: 1ST SERGEANT
WEAPON: AEK-971
KleanupGuy
FACTION: US
KIT: ENGINEER
RANK: MASTER SERGEANT I
WEAPON: RPG-7
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White Knight Chronicles International Edition

Where an archaic world enjoys social networking and MMORPG means mini multiplayer online roleplaying game

FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCE**
DEVELOPER: **LEVEL-5**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY 26**

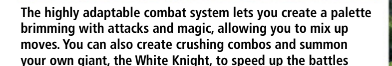
The race is still on for the first real *WOW*-style RPG on console. Several are gearing up for release, but while we wait for the likes of *DC Universe Online* or *Final Fantasy XIV* to obliterate social lives outside of the PC community, there's always *White Knight Chronicles*' interesting experiment in connectivity. More of an add-on to its singleplayer story – and one that's been patched and perfected between its initial Japanese and upcoming European release – it's an interesting mix of online multiplayer, social networking and user generated content. Credit to Level-5: that's all the factsheet buzzwords licked in one hit. You can almost hear the focus-testing team's rattle of high fives.

The online components are reached through the in-game Geonet, described by associate producer Kumi Yuasa as "like Facebook". It's essentially a homepage for each player that can only be accessed once you have completed the game's opening chapter. From here you can network, keep track of updates and changes, write a blog, create a friends list, read other people's blogs and meet on forums to discuss tactics or item creation. Level-5 has kept the presentation clean, with sections separated clearly into tabs, creating a comfortable and friendly online portal. It'll be interesting to see how players take to having their own in-game channel to meet each other and swap diaries of their grinding exploits.

One of the more interesting features is Hometown, essentially a simple level editor that enables you to build your own, well, home town. You can choose and place buildings and other structures to create your own space, which also acts as a lobby for meeting other players before a match. It's not quite *LittleBigRPG* but there are 150+ items to mix and match, and it's more than for just looks. Some items can't be found or unlocked, only bought or created from recovered materials. Plus, you can 'scout' in-game NPCs, selecting them to live in your suburb once you've discovered them in the singleplayer. Again, it's not just cosmetic. Characters have modifiers that affect your town. A farmer's green fingers, say, will increase the number of plant and flower related items generated in and around your streets – items that can then be used to manufacture weapons and gear. As you gather cash and other objects your Hometown even levels up, increasing the area you have to build in and the number of NPCs it can support. It's an enticing little management project to potter around with when you're all quested out.

And, finally, there's the actual online gameplay. For some reason, while 12 people can mingle in your homemade lobby, only four can actually embark on a subquest. There are over 100 extra missions, just over 50 included in the game and another 50 planned for DLC. There's plenty of variation, too, with escort missions, treasure recovery and rescues adding texture to the usual 'kill everything' theme. Each one is at least an hour's worth of action to get through once you've finished the 60-hour story.





The highly adaptable combat system lets you create a palette brimming with attacks and magic, allowing you to mix up moves. You can also create crushing combos and summon your own giant, the White Knight, to speed up the battles



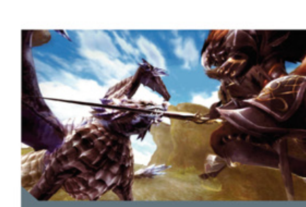
Larger enemies look good but their scale is deceptive. They aren't as lethal as their size suggests and battles often consist of long grudge matches to whittle them down



Environments are basic but functional. They are also large and heavily populated with monsters. So expect lots of walking and time-consuming battles against wasps







Once upon an active battle system

***White Knight*'s singleplayer story is, in all honesty, clichéd to the point of parody. When a kingdom is attacked, no-name village boy Leonard finds and activates a magical suit of seven-metre-tall armour, the White Knight. From then on it's the usual 'save everyone' quest with the equivalent of a Power Rangers-style medieval mech to call on when facing larger enemies. The battle system uses a timer to mete out attacks as characters move in realtime. The most interesting aspect is the ability to create custom combos, combining magic and sword skills to make high-damage sequences that can be tuned to suit playing styles, or for specific enemies.**



Fans of cameo, expect to meet one or two characters from the Nippon Ichi universe as you progress, including Mikan, a cat from *Jigsaw World* that cries orange juice, and, of course, the company's mascot Prinny from the *Disgaea* series







FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **NIPPON ICHI SOFTWARE**
DEVELOPER: **NIPPON ICHI/HIT MAKER**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **MARCH 12**

Last Rebellion

Discover the divine sequence as the gods of life and death clash

Nippon Ichi's appetite for publishing ostensibly traditional yet genre-busting Japanese esoterica shows no signs of waning. In *Last Rebellion*, the company makes its first step into full 3D, leaving behind the sprites and pixellated snark of its strategy-RPG catalogue to investigate the damp corridors of an otherworld in turmoil.

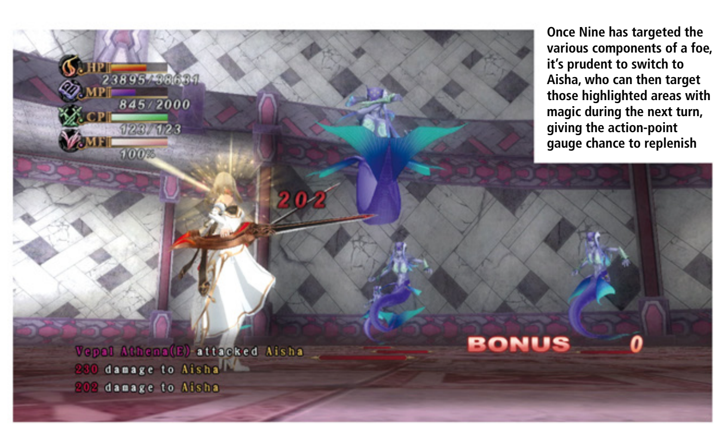
On the surface the uninspiring visuals, sub-par manga character designs, still-image cutscenes and tortuous voice acting suggest an unimaginative, bland, perhaps even anachronistic experience. The game's slippery premise, focusing on the tussle between the world's life-giving and life-taking divine entities, and the role of your two characters in trying to maintain balance of population, seems drawn from the worst kind of anime excess. And the drab environments, lacking in detail, polish or pizzazz, make this a dreary place to inhabit, let alone explore.



While you strike body parts in different sequences in an attempt to find the optimum order, you also weaken the enemy in those areas you attack most, slowing them down with attacks to the legs and so on

But beneath the surface it's immediately clear that there's a network of curious, innovative systems, which reveal themselves in the turn-based battle system. Here, it's possible to target multiple points of an enemy: their head, arms, legs, torso and so on. Providing you have enough action points in the bank, you may target all of these disparate components, selecting the order of your attacks from a dropdown menu before watching the resulting flurry of sword strikes play out onscreen. While it's possible to find victory in simply attacking enemy body parts in a random order, the metagame is to find the optimal sequence of attacks to cause the most damage. The sequence of correct attacks is made clear as you happen upon it, making this element to the battle system rather like a puzzle game of elimination, one that plays out on top of the standard RPG concerns about hit-point management.

Every time you strike a body part in its correct sequence, 'BINGO' flashes up on screen. String enough BINGOs together and you earn a combo that, in turn, deals out extra experience points and nets better items. As if this conceit wasn't enough innovation, soon after the game begins you gain control of a second character, and the ability to switch between either avatar at any point in the field. During battles, lead characters Nine and Aisha share their action-point gauge as well as a single turn, forcing you to make a strategic decision before each round as to who to use next. It's rare for a game to so closely hold to tradition in some areas and so fervently disrupt them in others. The question remains as to whether the gamble will be a successful one.



Once Nine has targeted the various components of a foe, it's prudent to switch to Aisha, who can then target those highlighted areas with magic during the next turn, giving the action-point gauge chance to replenish



Population growth

Formival, *Last Rebellion*'s life-giving heavenly antagonist, has been getting the better of Meitilia, the god of death, by reincarnating people at a faster rate than they can be destroyed. In a somewhat liberal take on Shintoist creed, a creature must have both its body and its soul destroyed to prevent the chance of reincarnation. Your two characters, who side with Meitilia in wanting to reduce the population of Junovald, are each responsible for destroying one of these parts: Nine, a Blade who can destroy the physical element, and Aisha being a Sealer who can destroy the soul. It's a slightly tortuous setup, but one that provides the game's core character-switching conceit, as well as setting the stage for a buddy tale of sorts.





ModNation Racers exchanges a hubworld for a menu – an instanced online piazza where you can meet other racers, view scoreboards and popular creations, and access race and creation modes. Still, we'd rather a shortcut than have to sit through two loading screens









ModNation's sound design is a delight, from the ripping bass noise of powerful engines to the cries of eagles in the Alpine wilderness, not to mention the pleasant milk-bottle clink as you fiddle around with menu items

ModNation Racers

Has Sony found its own blue turtle shell in the 'Play, Create, Share' mantra?

FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCE**
DEVELOPER: **UNITED FRONT GAMES, SCE SAN DIEGO STUDIO**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **SPRING**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E207**

Third-hand ideas are usually sad, atrophied things, a bit of joy shed with every stage of dissemination. Yet Sony's Miis – we mean Avatars – no, sorry, Mods – inspire unexpected enthusiasm, each one grinning and jigging about with a faintly psychotic energy. Sony has sometimes struggled to balance classy austerity with emotional engagement (Home retains the faint vibe of an advert for male grooming products), but even before you've slapped a pair of eyes on it, the vinyl-like figurine that sits behind the wheel of your *ModNation Racers* kart exudes a defiant cheekiness.

The characters can be painted and accessorised with huge freedom: as with *Forza*, decals are to be liberally applied, rotated and resized to create uniquely elaborate designs. The beta test has already thrown up depictions of Mario, Spider-Man and Helghast, but, copyright-baiting aside, a noticeable absence of user-generated genitalia suggests that the process of publishing your creations is under the careful vigilance of Sony, even at this early stage.

Kart customisation is no less potent, yet it's the track-creation tools that steal the show, enabling players to build a complex circuit in less than a minute, instantly populating its borders with buildings, trees, signs and bollards. You draw the track simply by driving, altering its elevation by moving the right stick up and down. When we saw the game last it was easy to lay down a track that would be impossible to navigate at any speed, but now your turning circle is restricted to avoid inadvertently creating nightmare corners. At any point you can press triangle and the steamroller you're driving fast-forwards to close the track – its potential auto-completed shape is always displayed at the bottom of the screen, constantly morphing as you trundle around.

Having created such a course, much further modificaton is possible, moving individual props, widening, raising or lowering roadways, adding shortcuts, jumps, pickups and hazards. Then it can be instantly tested in a race with AI. The power this tool offers is considerable, its automation technology prudent in its placement. Yet we wonder how easy it will be for players to create tracks with a truly unique feel. At the time of writing only the Alpine theme is available, but even if the number is extended to a dozen it seems tricky for each track to escape the chosen theme's aesthetic in a way that allows the same sense of ownership as *LittleBigPlanet*'s level creation does. There's also inherently a limited purpose: you are creating a racetrack. How many Alpine racecourses will you really need?

One other remaining question concerns the racing itself. Much has been wisely borrowed from the *Mario Kart* template, powerslide and all. The vehicles themselves are a thrill to throw about, accelerating with real zip; the power-ups are a dramatic, varied bunch, too. But races feel more chaotic than perhaps they should – even the developer-made tracks aren't as clearly, cleanly constructed as you might hope, and such issues are only going to be amplified in the swathes of player-made tracks to follow. But even if the UGC turns out to be a novelty, the beta's charms in motion and aesthetic suggest that *ModNation Racers* will still achieve a podium finish.

Much of the customisation menu remains locked during this beta. But how it will be unlocked remains a worry – does the key take the form of gameplay or micropayment?



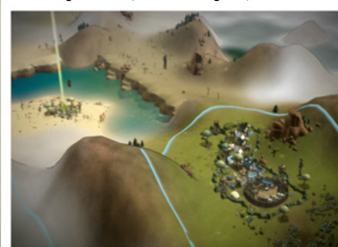
Power of three

ModNation brings a twist to the traditional kart-racer pickup. Although which flavour of weapon you receive from rolling over a bonus is randomised, if you elect not to use it, subsequent pickups increase its power. The green pickup gives you a speed boost at level one, and warps you forward several places at level three. Powered-up rockets home in on enemies and thunder clouds hunt down opponents. But with all this disruption happening in courses that are sometimes rather unpredictable in their design, the actual race can feel a little arbitrary.





A hinted feature is that *Elemental*'s second playable faction, The Fallen, blacken the lands to build settlements just as the humans make it verdant. It could make for interesting scorched (or, indeed, irrigated) earth tactics



Elemental: War Of Magic

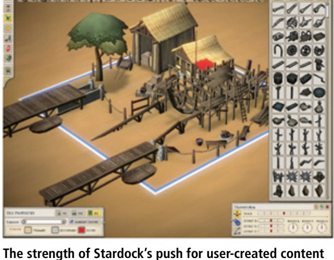
Stardock plans to secure the hearts of strategy gamers everywhere by resurrecting one of its prophets, albeit after dusting him off first

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **STARDOCK**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q3 2010**

Over the last two years the fantasy setting has been pulled and stretched to fit so many different genres, irony or no irony, that we seem to have come full circle. It's now the realist games, the *Anno*s and *Silent Hunter*s, that appear outlandish and curious. Nonetheless, with *Elemental*, Stardock's spiritual successor to 1994 strategy darling *Master Of Magic*, the cel-shaded dragons and sorcery are being spread thickly and innocently. Unfashionable? Maybe, but then so's providing comprehensive mod support, something *Elemental* will also have. This is definitively a PC game.

The beta currently available to pre-order customers might be restrictive, but it does give a vague awareness of the game to come. Drawing most heavily from *Civilization*, the game sees players start with control of a single sorcerer who can create settlements by imbuing the landscape with a chunk of his essence. From there you sink into the familiar territory of creating build queues and picking your way up the research tree while exploring the landscape, but with a pleasing emphasis on the personal.

For one, you get to choose where on the map each new construction is attached to your villages, perhaps making them long and thin, then adding heavy fortifications in a Hadrian's Wall style. The population of these villages is measured not in thousands, but dozens, and the regiments of troops they produce are not only hand-tailored to your specifications (down to the pose they strike on their portrait) but rival football teams in size. If you like, you can even transfer some of your hero's essence into a handful of these brave souls, creating spellcasting sub-champions who share any experience they earn with your protagonist.

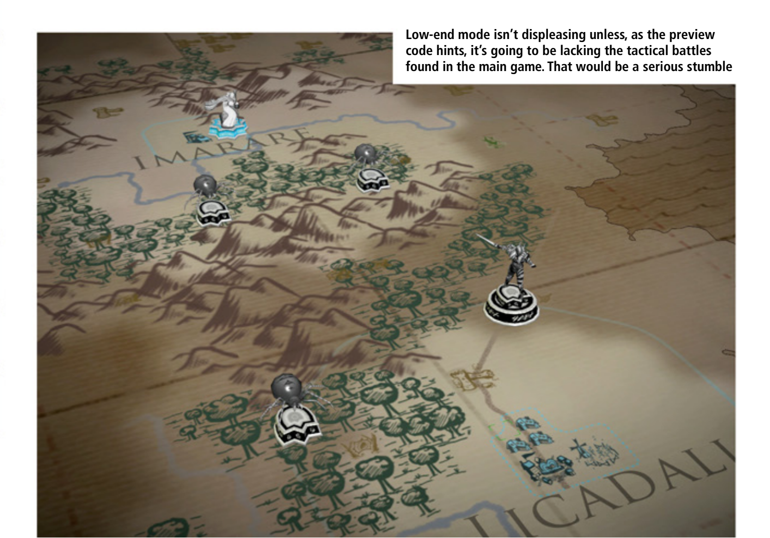


The strength of Stardock's push for user-created content in *Elemental* wasn't seen at all in 2009. If the game's community reacts well to this, it's easy to imagine more than a few publishers and developers will be taking note

It's probably this easy personality and the watercolour art style that will be supplying *Elemental*'s appeal, as opposed to the fantasy world. From a design standpoint, the splitting of power from armies and cities to smaller-scale armies, cities, heroes and spellcasters is intended to help obfuscate who's in the lead and allow tense, surprising plays. The player cultivating a hamlet into an economic powerhouse might find their jewel abruptly annihilated by the volcano spell of an opponent's dedicated wizard.

Similarly, Stardock's plan is for a range of victory objectives allowing players to stray from economic and military prowess. The 'Spell of Making' might bear a strong resemblance to *Civilization*'s space colonisation (less *Alpha Centauri*, more abracadabra), but there'll also be a diplomatic victory and the so-far-unseen Quest of Dominion feature, which will presumably see players manoeuvring heroes around the map in a more RPG-like style.

On a more mundane note, Stardock is also ensuring that *Elemental* makes the most of high-end PCs while also running on "crappy notebooks". This Herculean technical hurdle is being leapt with one simple option: you can toggle the 3D graphics on and off, turning the game into a Tolkeinesque fantasy map covered in playing pieces. That's real magic.



Low-end mode isn't displeasing unless, as the preview code hints, it's going to be lacking the tactical battles found in the main game. That would be a serious stumble



You can drive it away today

Getting access to the beta of a game you just pre-ordered is quite the draw, so it must have been a touch crushing to *Elemental*'s eager fans as they loaded up the game and discovered (beyond a splash screen reading "We now present the diplomacy beta, aka beta 1D, aka your digital lump of coal. May you dream sweetly of playing beta 2D" and a comedy 8bit-styled intro) that their code was rather limited. No 3D graphics, no story missions, no victory conditions beyond military victory, no fiddling with the size or type of the map, no voice acting, all battles auto-resolved, 90 per cent of flavour text missing and only one playable side. And bugs. Lots and lots of bugs.

15

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MANIPULATE

PROTECT

ASSAULT

MURDER

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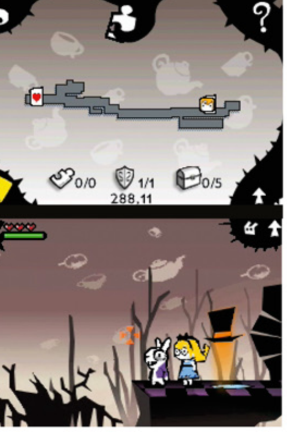
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FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **DISNEY INTERACTIVE**
DEVELOPER: **ETRANGES LIBELLULES**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **MARCH 6**



Alice In Wonderland

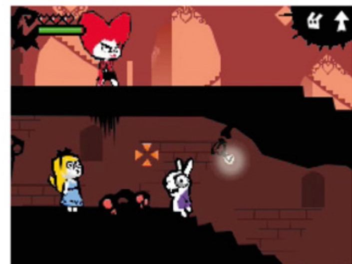
'Inspired by' the Tim Burton movie, but with a delightful direction all of its own. Curiouser and curiouser...



DSi-specific features, though we didn't see them, will use the camera to colour-match for puzzles and opening chests

Developer Etranges Libellules is in charge of both the DS and Wii tie-ins for Tim Burton's Alice In Wonderland, and at a recent showing it was the dinkier version that caught our eye. Eschewing an interpretation of the movie (the route followed by the Wii game), this has a more tangential relation.

It's still a production that owes a lot to Burton's trademark stylings, though. The art style is economic and wonderfully expressive, with flat textures and outlines creating an evocative backdrop to the fluidly animated main characters. You play and switch between Wonderland's residents, including the White Rabbit, the March Hare, the Mad Hatter, the Caterpillar and the Cheshire Cat. They're all brilliantly realised visually, with arguably more to do with Burton's Nightmare Before Christmas than Alice In Wonderland, and functionality is woven into their look. Each character, for example, is a bold primary colour, and the interactive background elements in each stage are similarly colour-coded. It's a little bit hand-holdy, yes, but a hell of a lot better than hint boxes.





Each character has their own special ability which bears some relation to their character: the March Hare pelts enemies with cups and saucers, the Hatter shrinks them, the Cheshire cat turns invisible, and the White Rabbit rewinds time

It's a puzzle-based platformer with the odd bit of fighting, and the constant presence of Alice is a bit like Yorda. She'll follow you around while you deal with all the problems, and occasionally you'll have to leave her behind to sort something out. When enemies get their chance, they'll grab her and throw her into a portal, and you have about 30 seconds to dash over and pull her back out before it's game over – the only way the game can end, apparently.

Other neat touches are on show: knock off the armour of the playing-card warriors, then blow them offscreen and away using the DS mic; swap the overworld map pieces around to change environments; rewind time as the White Rabbit to send an enemy's projectile back into their face. Whether these are all the big ideas, or just a small part of the total, remains to be seen. But at first sight, the quality and variety of this production is a real surprise.

Fragile Dreams: Farewell Ruins Of The Moon

Not just another Wii JRPG: Tri-Crescendo tries to bring a little bit of Silent Hill to the traditional statfest

FORMAT: **WII**
PUBLISHER: **RISING STAR GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **NAMCO/TRI-CRESCENDO**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY 16**

Darkness may have always had a close relationship with horror, shrouding as it does the detail and geography of your vicinity, but in videogames it's too often used merely to mask technical woe. Not so in *Fragile Dreams*, Namco's gentle horror RPG which uses the premise of a world that has lost its light not to protect the game's artists from the keen glare of a critical eye but as a meaningful stylistic choice. Indeed, this is one of the best-looking Wii titles in the traditional anime tradition, placing well-realised characters within rich and detailed environments, each carefully characterised by colour and shade.



New items can be acquired throughout the game from a mobile shopkeeper with rather distinctive sartorial leanings

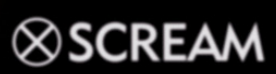
The game tells the story of a young, semi-amnesiac boy who finds himself in a post-apocalyptic world following the death of his guardian and grandfather. Seto traipses his way through the landscape in search of other survivors as well as clues to his own past. This somewhat worn premise is made fresh by way of an amalgam of embedded short stories and sketches about the protagonist, some of which were contributed by fans ahead of the game's release.

While you brandish a bamboo sword, key interactions are channelled down the beam of Seto's flashlight, which is used to illuminate the environment and solve puzzles. The boy also has access to a metal detector, used to find objects littered on the ground, while clues and advice are whispered to you through the Remote's tinny speaker. These features, easily dismissed as gimmicks by Wii owners weary of lip-service to the hardware's capabilities, are generally well integrated, helped by the horror overtones that inject interactions with tension.



With the option to switch between English and Japanese voice acting, those who prefer to experience their eastern horror in the original language are well served

The pressure of the experience is heightened by the fact that Seto is a poor fighter who swings his sword in awkward arcs, emphasising the need to combine torchlight with violence to slow those ghouls who seek to consume you. The resulting ambience of foreboding may then be closer to *Ico* than *Silent Hill*, while, in its curious combination of systems, *Fragile Dreams* is quite unlike anything else.



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FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**
DEVELOPER: **CLIMAX GROUP**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **TBC**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E208**

Rocket Knight

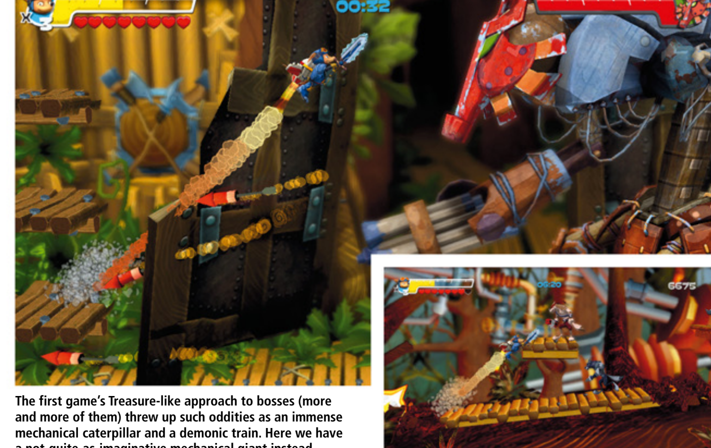
Is 16bit star Sparkster rocketing towards a revival?

Every success story has its imitators. The Beatles have the Monkees, Doctor Who has Primeval, and Sonic The Hedgehog has Bubsy the Bobcat. Oh, and Sparkster. With furry features and what might once have been described as an 'attitude', Konami's would-be mascot is definitely a product of his time. He certainly had an effect on the British developer that has been granted permission by Konami to attempt to rouse Sparkster from his 16-year-long hibernation.

The result, on the evidence of a handful of early levels, is an old fashioned side-scroller it's easy to imagine sleepwalking through. The original game (*Rocket Knight Adventures* released on the Mega Drive in 1993) was a traditional platformer given a boost by clever level design, frenetic pacing and a jetpack. Not so this retread.

Here the multiple boss battles are replaced with swathes of identikit enemies swept away with a Pavlovian prod of the fire button. The clever ricochet move that once tested even the quickest reactions is supplanted by pickups that hang just out of reach enough to take you out of your way. Even the side-scrolling shooter-style sections have been slowed to a crawl.

Climax has kept the component parts (whiskers, anthropomorphic baddies and, yes, a jetpack) but scrimped on the imagination. The result appears to be a retread that makes the original game's virtues a chore. The final version will have much to prove, then, with all hopes resting on more inventive design and less hand-holding later on in the game. But on this evidence, Sparkster might have benefited from a faithful re-release rather than a contemporary reimagining.



The first game's Treasure-like approach to bosses (more and more of them) threw up such oddities as an immense mechanical caterpillar and a demonic train. Here we have a not-quite-as-imaginative mechanical giant instead





The visuals in *Rocket Knight* hover in that uncomfortable limbo known as 2.5D. It's a concession to new technology and trends that doesn't serve Sparkster's shenanigans too well. Even the sword-brandishing, armour-plated pig baddies of the original have been replaced by RPG-wielding commando wolves

FORMAT: **WII**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **SANDLOT**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBC (UK, US)**

Zangeki No Reginleiv

Sandlot drops the guns and bugs in favour of axes, giants and co-op combat. Could this be what Wii is waiting for?

The first (but apparently not the last) Wii recipient of a black game box, *Zangeki No Reginleiv* is being backed by Nintendo of Japan in a big way. The colour change can be interpreted in all sorts of ways: if you were being unkind, you might speculate that it marks this as an 'adult' title. But more importantly, with regard to what the game brings to Wii, it's an attempt to differentiate Zangeki from the other software on the shelves. This, the black box declares, is no minigame collection.

A welcome return to top-tier action from Sandlot, developer of *Earth Defense Force 2017*, Zangeki is something of a spiritual sequel to the bug-blasting marathon. Set on a world of huge islands, the human population is under attack from an army led by giants. As one of the gods, you're not having any of that, and set off with your trusty whacking stick to fight alongside the little folk. The selling point of Zangeki, however, and what has caused the sizeable bulk of Nintendo to back it, is its support for fourplayer co-operative games online.

If you're thinking *Monster Hunter*, so is Sandlot. Despite the Wii version of *Monster Hunter* 'only' selling a million, networked games of this ilk remain incredibly popular in Japan, and the success of *Phantasy Star Online* on Dreamcast shows there's a home console market waiting for the right title. By incorporating friends lists, lobbies and Wii Speak alongside five levels of difficulty that scale up to the ominous Inferno, *Zangeki* addresses many criticisms of the Wii online service and provides a structure that enables players rather than keeping them apart. A western release will be some time coming, if at all, but this is one to keep your eye on from afar – its success or otherwise may make more of a difference to the future of Wii, in Japan at least, than any of the smashed sales records left in *New Super Mario Bros Wii*'s wake.

There's more than a bit of *Dynasty Warriors* in the action, but the difference is in the motion controls that map to your weapon (the MotionPlus attachment is supported, though not essential), and with over 300 potential tools there's a lot of variety





There's an overworld map where all pretence at not copying *Monster Hunter* is abandoned, and you can choose the type of mission difficulty to suit your party



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○ CONFESS

△ INVESTIGATE

□ DECEIVE

✕ EXECUTE

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FORMAT: **DSI**
PUBLISHER: **XFORM**
DEVELOPER: **GOODBYE GALAXY GAMES**
ORIGIN: **NETHERLANDS**
RELEASE: **TBC**

Flipper

Like the goldfish, the polygons are MIA

Even looking past the developer's *Commander Keen* name-dropping, *Flipper* oozes retro credibility. Largely the work of a single designer, Goodbye Galaxy Games' puzzle platformer comes with an archly whimsical story (off to rescue your goldfish, you'll have to get past pirates, ghouls and robots), a chunky primary-colour art style and, to seal the deal, the whole thing's powered by a home-made voxel engine.

While it's hard to ever argue against the use of voxels – volumetric pixels are, after all, the game design equivalent of steampunk, suggesting an alternate history in which the polygon didn't crush all competition – designer Hugo Smits has far more than plucky eccentricity on his mind here. Much of *Flipper* revolves around terrain deformation, its 3D playgrounds navigated, for the most part, by blasting out chunks of the ground, whittling cliffs into handy slopes, and rebuilding old walls block by block – all of which would be rather inelegant if he'd used any other graphical solution.

Levels are stocked with the internet's favourites – pirates and ghosts have already been revealed, and it's slightly surprising ninjas didn't get a look in. There's always the sequel for that



***Flipper* started life as a standalone DS title before the original publisher went under. In its new incarnation, it should help add a touch of substance to DSi's downloadable lineup**

Getting voxels to work on a handheld in the first place is enough to earn Smits' game some kind of attention, of course, but there are plenty of other reasons to keep an eye out for any missing goldfish washing up on the DSiWare Store in the next few months. With smart touchscreen controls and four differently themed worlds to explore – all riddled with bonuses – *Flipper* looks both clever and generously built, a collision of a rich colour palette and oddball technology that seems destined to charm.



Nier

It's always best to face bullet hell with a good book

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**
DEVELOPER: **CAVIA**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **SPRING**



The combat system is simple – attack, push, defend and evade – but, as *Bayonetta* showed, depth comes with the implementation rather than the scheme

It was a coincidence that a demo of *Nier* should appear just as The Road made its way into cinemas, since both depict the tender relationship between a father and his child in a starkly apocalyptic world. *Nier*'s opening is meant to be taking place in summer, but its destroyed modern city setting is snowy and Nier and his daughter, Yonah, are weak with hunger and disease. Comparisons kind of end there, though. The Road's most important prop is a shopping trolley, but *Nier*'s is a sarcastic talking book called Grimoire Weiss.

Nier is a thirdperson action RPG in which the eponymous father fights with swords and magic powered by the book, which floats alongside him. Nier's able to equip just two spells, or 'Words', at a time, including Dark Lance, a powerful shot that you aim to fire, or Dark Hand, an blast of area damage which powers up the longer you charge it.

His arsenal increases in strength as he gains levels, lending the battles with the towering and black Shades, the game's principal antagonists, frenetic bombast that belies the sombre storyline. Oh, and we should probably have already mentioned this, but the game starts with voiceover of a woman shouting, "Weiss, you dumbass!"



One of *Nier*'s freshest ideas is to have some enemies fire streams of shoot 'em up-style bullets which you must either avoid or have Grimoire Weiss absorb like a shield – or your Dark Whirlwind can always tear a path through them

The second section we see is set in a homely fantasy town under blue skies. Here we witness how, in true RPG fashion, NPCs provide access to shops and side missions. Yonah's recovering and Nier has enough money to buy a new sword, but calamity strikes as a giant spider beast appears.

The ensuing boss fight is a case of pattern recognition and dodging along avenues and on battlements as it marches towards Yonah. Hit its weakpoints enough, though, and a 'Gauge' appears, a time window in which you can do some lasting damage and advance to the next stage of the fight, notably the appearance of the nubile (and hermaphrodite) ninja Kainé. It's mechanical stuff, but it has a sense of verve that makes *Nier*'s strange genre-crossing one to watch.



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FACED WITH A CHANGING LANDSCAPE, CRYSIS RESPONDS IN KIND. WE DISCOVER THE NEW JUNGLE, PLATFORMS, ENGINE AND IDEALS OF ITS DEVASTATING FPS SEQUEL

It's strange to think that in just a few short months, maybe at the most a year, those incredible screenshots will become real. A milestone of playable photorealism will be reached. Aliasing and slowdown: things of the past. Tomorrow's graphics cards, with all their processing power and bandwidth, will be given the rudest of awakenings, forced to hit standards and temperatures that put warranties at risk. Assumptions of what's possible will change, while the upgrade potential of this spectacular game will be a tantalising unknown. We're talking, of course, about *Crysis 1*.

We let it slide at the time, what with the shambles surrounding driver support and DX10, but when we shacked up in Crytek's Frankfurt studio for our 2007 *Crysis* review, the game was running in 720p. The native resolution of the monitor was higher, the rationale being that if you let the screen upscale things itself, you'd avoid overheads like high resolution and anti-aliasing. How foolish we were to think that when Nvidia and ATI got their acts together – for launch, maybe? – none of this would be necessary.

From an incongruous row of cinema seats planted square in the middle of its 'Treehouse'

TITLE: **CRYSIS 2**
FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **CRYTEK**
ORIGIN: **GERMANY**
RELEASE: **TBC**

mo-cap studio, all part of an elaborate *Crysis 2* reveal, we remind ourselves that only an elite handful of gamers can play the first game properly. By which we mean perfectly, just like the trailers and screenshots. Make no mistake: the game built to raise the bar of PC graphics did exactly that; give it hardware strong enough to double and then downsize its resolution, giving the 2x2 supersampling it yearns for, and its achievements become clear. In lighting, texturing, moving and composing its natural 3D world, the game is practically flawless.

But few have the luxury of knowing it, which in part explains our neighbours for this presentation: an Xbox 360 and PS3. At no point today will we see *Crysis 2*, set in the vertically adventurous New York City, running on PC. The landscape has changed, both industrially and culturally, and the now 600-strong Crytek has only one thing on its mind: conquest. This will be, insists executive producer **Nathan Camarillo**, "the best experience within each platform."

Oh yes, everyone's on-message today, which seems a shame after the candid chit-chat of our very first *Crysis* visit, back in the studio's old digs in quiet and claustrophobic Coburg. So much has changed since then, from the move to Frankfurt and its global expansion – part of *Crysis 2*, we learn, is being made by recent UK purchase Free Radical (now Crytek UK) – to the studio's image as a kind of FPS statesman, that you have to worry about its ability to dream. Made in a place the Yerli brothers – president Cevat, managing directors Avni and Faruk – were desperate to leave, *Far Cry* was like a postcard set in a locker door, escapism bordering on tourism. *Crysis* was more military, made by people with newly found things to lose.







"DESTRUCTION AND SCARRING OF THE ENVIRONMENT: THEY'VE BEEN AROUND FOREVER. OUR TAKE WILL BE UNIQUE"

Not that *Crysis 2* is a fraught or tentative production, as you'll discover in a moment. First, though, the lights are down, the screen is lit, and it's time for an orientation video. Set three years after the first game, placing it 13 years from now, the sequel moves the fight for Earth to a new island: Manhattan. A population of 20 million has been crushed, other major cities – London, Rio – destroyed.

We arrive late, of course, into a post-apocalyptic environ like none you've ever seen – unless, that is, you've seen 2012, I Am Legend, Independence Day, The Omega Man, *Prototype*, The Book Of Eli, *Fallout 3*, Cloverfield, *FEAR 2*, The Postman, The Core, Godzilla, The Road, The Day After Tomorrow or *Resistance 2*.

WORLD IN ACTION

Given the spiritual differences between *Far Cry* and *Crysis*, we ask Faruk Yerli whether the increasingly global nature of the studio and its network has cost it some of its European sensibilities. *Far Cry* was, in its difficulty and lightheartedness, a distinctly European game. "That's its weakness," he argues. "We learned from that, and the multinational team makes it more appealing because we learn about differing tastes. We know the Europeans like more challenging and strategic games while Americans like simpler games. But it's not a problem. Proportionally, I think we have equal sales now across all the territories, and obviously that's important."

This is an issue, isn't it, all this disaster porn? After a particularly zealous year of vandalising famous monuments, aren't we all a bit, well, spent?

Not if you ask **Cevat Yerli**: "I Am Legend and The Day After Tomorrow were unique and both 'owned' a version of New York. Ours, likewise, is in harmony with the Nanosuit. In *Crysis*, we changed that island in ways the player didn't expect. Expect bigger here. It'll be a New York City like none in games or cinema." Furthermore, these games and movies, says Camarillo, are more than just a seasonal fad. "Destruction and scarring of the environment: they're universal themes that have been around forever. Our take will be unique."

You'd be forgiven for thinking otherwise. While hardly an entrant in the God's Lonely Man genre, this concept trailer for *Crysis 2* – just a slideshow of artwork – isn't without its clichés. Broken bridges, abandoned cars, shattered





Concept art shows darker, more stylised levels which should better exploit the new light and shadow systems of CryEngine 3, which we're told can add hundreds of lights without affecting performance. The trick, says Camarillo, is to use them cosmetically but also strategically, to guide the player subconsciously









Carl Jones (top), director of business development for CryEngine, and Nathan Camarillo, executive producer of *Crysis 2*. The latter's list of game credits includes Interplay's *Freespace 2* and the *Red Faction* series for THQ



Looking beyond *Crysis 2*, Yerli anticipates a renaissance for PC graphics after DX11. "A new 'general purpose approach' to graphics and parallelism in code design means new style and technique explorations that have previously been limited by discrete functions. More flexibility in programming graphics means more variety in solutions, and looks ultimately great"

storefronts and skyscrapers propping each other up like walking wounded: it's not exactly City 17. But as the trailer makes way for a live demo and we move inside the new and improved Nanosuit 2, the promises start to ring true.

The level begins as you exit a subway into a part of downtown Manhattan isolated by rubble, the battle underway as an alien frigate swoops across the street and up towards a distant skyscraper. A pair of attack helicopters give chase, radio chatter providing commentary. Missiles are fired, the damage is terminal, and the craft lurches behind the building, then punches clean through it, leaving a rather impressive realtime hole as it tumbles back to Earth. In surviving the crash, we overhear, this new landmark has just become the hottest place in town. Prized alien samples are aboard and everyone is after them, though not always for the same reason. A mysterious objective – "Find a way to Nathan Gould's apartment" – has been replaced.

What happens next is a microcosm of the first game, the humans fighting over who gets first dibs, the aliens making them regret it. There's a twist, though, in that it's not the Koreans this time but Americans, members of the Crynet Systems infantry. Yes, the same company that made the Nanosuit, and no, we don't know why they're out to get you. "You're private sector, just like the rest of us," squawks one soldier to another. "Now keep your eyes peeled for that Nanosuit fuck." Definitely out to get you.

Now, about that Nanosuit, and its role at the centre of *Crysis*' universe. Visually, it's easy to dismiss as just another chunk of neo-military fetishwear, what with its ski goggles and abundant knobbly bits. But consider this: in September last year, it received the coveted Red Dot Award, an international prize for excellence in design. *Crysis* wasn't the only 'digital game' to win, and it's hard to overlook the fact that of the seven others, six were German, just like the award itself. But it was still the one game lauded for character design, which is quite something considering the suit's habit of obscuring the person wearing it. The point: to a large extent, the suit is the character, with a history and attention to detail to rival the man inside.

That said, "player-centric storytelling is a buzzword internally, a cheesy but good definition," says Camarillo. "We want the player to experience the gameworld from the inside of the suit to the outside. You're not just hitting the magic trigger that causes the next thing to happen, you're caught up in the chaos of what's going on. You're figuring out how you can solve this problem over the course of the story, and hopefully it's not too obvious."

And where the suit goes, the rest of *Crysis* must follow. The farther it jumps, the more it needs terrain. The harder it hits, the more its enemies need strength, be it in numbers, firepower or intelligence. The more it can take, the more it must be given.



Crytek's won't say how much vehicle interaction will be in *Crysis 2*, but in the demo you can jump in the enemy SUV, just like last time. Camarillo says he often strays from his script in demos for impromptu carmageddon



Tree chopping? Yes, it's still in there. Expect a host of new physics tricks this time, though, each benefitting both the player and AI – whichever uses it first

analysed from a strategic distance, while civilian bodies, which are everywhere, each flash up a unique blob of text. No word yet on the origin of this data, so we'll just have to see if it's Orwellian backstory or a great big plot hole.

A few storeys later and you reach the other side, where it's clear the path to your objective, besides being smashed and bent into platforms and trenches, is littered with Crynet troops. They pull up in one of the first game's vehicles, hop out, have a little chat and begin combing the area. "I wanna see gratuitous aggression, people," says one. He's certainly about to get it.

That was a problem in the first game, the poor North Koreans easily beaten while the aliens… well, they just didn't give a toss. "They just floated around the environment," Camarillo admits. "They weren't tactically engaged, they threw conventions out the window and they didn't use cover – that's something we wanted to change."

Nanosuit 2.0, then, improves on its predecessor without feeling overpowered. Faced with a multi-storey car park, first in a parade of intricate environments, its debut in the demo isn't even aggressive. Tactical mode, which joins the familiar Strength, Armor, Speed and Cloak, is a neat cross between the *Crysis* binoculars and the scanner in *Metroid Prime*. Activate it and the HUD lights up with item markers and readouts, telling you who you're looking at, how they died or what it'll take to kill them. Every discarded weapon can be

NEW RADICALS

What led Crytek, a studio that publicly considers its workers 'heroes' while working on the most demanding videogames in the world, to buy Free Radical Design, the maker of critical and commercial flop *Haze*? "An extremely strong talent pool," says Faruk Yerli. "Those guys had bad luck with management, which was probably their own responsibility to a certain degree, but the team are really good. And you're seeing already the fruits of that in *Crysis*. I know they couldn't get enough funding for their projects – maybe they made bad contracts. But we know the people, we interviewed the people and went through all their CVs, so we bought it."

The road thus far has been notably straightforward for a Crytek game, though not so much when you consider its designers' love of action bubbles and bottlenecks. A studio whiteboard (which Crytek probably should have cleaned) bears the words: "Eight hours average play time, 48 action bubbles, ten minutes each." For all we know, this could describe a side-project called *Nomad & Sonic At The Special Olympics*, but you wouldn't put money on it. This particular bubble, then, is really no less adventurous than last time's, but the towering buildings, regular interiors and quite irregular sight of walls of rubble prove deceptive. "It was a large island in *Crysis* but you weren't interested in every square inch," says Camarillo. "There were large expanses, funnels and action spaces, and we're doing the same with New York. It's a comparable size.

"You're not interested in the 55th floor of each building, but we want you to feel you're surrounded. You have this freedom to explore these small pockets and go really deep on details, but seeing all of New York isn't necessarily that exciting, and it's not great for pacing or telling the kind of story we want. It's a constrained freedom."

"YOU'RE NOT JUST HITTING THE MAGIC TRIGGER THAT CAUSES THE NEXT THING TO HAPPEN, YOU'RE CAUGHT UP IN THE CHAOS"

Reassuringly, Crytek is the first to admit that the first game's opening chapter is, in a word, formulaic. A bit like Predator at first, Camarillo volunteers, before marching through "a bit of this story, a bit of that." No one's saying that's a bad thing, necessarily, but if you couple it with a rather relaxed approach to ambient storytelling, it does tend to leave you with no story at all. It happened then, but we're assured it won't happen now. And as if to fend off delusions of grandeur, there's even deference to Valve. Camarillo: "You play *Left 4 Dead* and kill 12,000 zombies, but there's a story in those levels: the government's lying, the military's lying. It's the world you can imagine in a zombie outbreak. So you take a little of that, and what games like *Half-Life 2* have done with direct storytelling, and you make it work without beating someone over the head with it."

Dustbins and mailboxes, though: those you can beat people with. Back in the demo, our guide has ditched the



What can PC owners expect from a multiplatform *Crysis*? "They don't need to worry about how good it will look," assures Yerli. "Our goal is to surpass *Crysis 1*, which is still considered a benchmark for PC gaming"









stealth and switched to scenery props, bullets and Nano-assisted haymakers. Even at a glance, it's clear that *Crysis'* combat has evolved. Enemies are everywhere, punches and pistol-whippings are suddenly more effective, and the opportunities are just a whole lot greater. Approaching the sprawling crash site, where platforms of masonry stare into chasms of tarmac, it's like an entire *Crysis* village has been folded in half, all the pieces and players tumbling into the middle. A bit like Heat, in fact, with each abandoned car popping and crumpling under fire, forcing you on to the next before it explodes.

Best of all, and in a massive improvement over the first game's use of the 360 controller, you can lean. Channelling *Medal Of Honor: Airborne* as much as *Killzone 2*, the new cover system lets you lock to a piece of scenery and lunge out with the stick to fire, snapping instinctively back to safety. Presumably it works as well as it looks – this demonstration is a strictly hands-off affair – even if we are asked not to scrawl down the button layout, since it is still in flux, much to chagrin of those who have to work with it.

From here until the aliens ride out, now represented by a *Halo*-esque ground force (another whiteboard references Stalkers, Grunts, Shadows, Screamers, Spotters, Changelings and Heavy Ticks), the action is relentless. At one point, the gun is wrenched off a military vehicle's roof and used to chop down enemies, but never does it make for a turkey



***Crysis* fans know how powerful the engine is, especially when it presents enough content for a whole game in one load, then invisibly streams more**

shoot. It's a short ride if you set the Nanosuit for maximum aggression, but that's the whole point. If you choose to, you can see, hear and do plenty in this tiny segment – enough for, at a guess, up to an hour of play.

It could be scanning corpses and mobile phones; standing in streets wrapped by the sounds of a city under siege; or looking up to see flocks of birds reflected in upper storeys, office debris floating to the ground. Fire hydrants spray fine mists over cars and vans, the doors of which hang open, their occupants slumped and their belongings

New York isn't entirely without its flora, of course, and it's strongly hinted that a helping of more traditional *Crysis* terrain will return in some form



TROUBLESOME X

While not quite millstones around Crytek's neck, Windows Vista and DirectX certainly stole plenty of attention from how *Crysis* actually played, and even things like its stunning, often underrated, artwork. Charged with evangelising the platform at the time, Cevat Yerli is a little more open about it now: "DX10 was frankly a moderate success. It did improve some aspects, but we didn't really get as much out of it as we were hoping for since we'd maxed out DX9. There were a lot of reasons, though. One was a lack of time, for sure, and limited access to DX10 hardware, even for us, though we did get some of the first cards ever."

strewn. We assume it all represents just the tip of this particular iceberg.

More comes to light in a second run of the same demo, designed to showcase the finer points of Nanosuit 2. The game's soundtrack, for one, changes drastically with each suit power. Tactical mode heightens your acuity to the point of hearing gravel move gently beneath the feet, or the conversations of distant enemies. Strength, meanwhile, hears you bound along with lead boots, the toughened Nanosuit turning incoming bullets into muffled thumps. Then there's the suite of modifiers that extend the game's arsenal, now themed around different suit powers. Directional bullet trails, X-ray vision and bullet deflection are mentioned, reinforcing Yerli's original concept of the "modular hero".

As the demo ends, it's a relief to note that the chairs aren't melting, none of the journalists present is sweating any more than usual, and the lights on the 360 console aren't flashing. The message is clear: this is *Crysis* with pretty much all the trimmings, running at pre-alpha without slowdown, and today's consoles are cool with it. They can take it.

It still leaves us with more questions than answers, especially when it comes to the game's idea of an urban open world. *GTA*, says Camarillo, is "a huge open world in which the level of interaction is limited. In *Crysis* it's about granularity." So while the game promises action spanning "three storeys up and down," the question of breadth seems unlikely to be answered to everyone's satisfaction. You almost certainly won't be hopping in one of few functioning taxi cabs, checking a global map for a mission marker and taking a grand tour of the Big Apple. Returning to the Cloverfield comparison, what's more likely is an onslaught of



tightly directed, frequently expansive levels that take you from murky depths to dizzying heights, full of enough details and opportunities for several return trips. No one's answering such questions today, anyway. For Crytek, this reveal has little to do with story or design, and everything to do with the code underneath.

Put simply, if the day's technical demos are anything to go by, there's a very real chance that the age of Unreal Engine 3 is about to be joined, if not threatened, by the age of CryEngine 3. Reticent about console R&D while making *Crysis*, the imminent DirectX10 being a neat distraction, Crytek isn't messing around this time.

As part of its 'What You See Is What You Play' feature set, Sandbox 3 can run a fully featured, fully interactive editor and game environment in realtime, *in sync*, across three monitors: one for 360, one for PS3 and the other, obviously, for PC. With a pad for each console, two designers can then play the game while a third, sat at the mouse and keyboard, makes sweeping changes under their feet. The assets are managed on the fly. There is no downtime. In conventional terms, there is no port: the game simply exists as multiformat. "All I need," says **Carl Jones**, director of







Alien ships based largely on those from the Matrix movies surf through the urban canyons, while strange, almost organic tendrils punch through tarmac

global business development, "is more space on my desk."

Can the new deferred lighting system really handle "hundreds of lights" with zero performance hit? Is supersampling really possible now if a team decides to allow it? As hard as it is to know what to believe, it's harder to know what to doubt when you consider things like *Aion: Tower Of Eternity*, the gorgeous MMOG powered by CryEngine 1, or the endless surprises of Time Of Day modding, a hobby that ekes startling photography from the original *Crysis* maps. One CryEngine 3 feature we're not shown in depth is realtime colour grading, by which a game's entire tone can be quickly and drastically changed. "We're not going to go film noir," says Camarillo, "but the engine could."

If this is Crytek running in what Gearbox president Randy Pitchford calls "risky generation-plus mode", then here's to taking risks. "Thanks, Randy, for caring," says Yerli, "but please focus your concerns on your own company. [Pitchford] doesn't know at all what the 600 people at Crytek are doing, and nor can I since timing is important and it isn't time yet. Rest assured, any project or development reveal at any time – let's say today – means that the decision was made about two to three years ago, and the first deep thoughts were probably about five years ago. At least that's how it is here at Crytek, and today we're thinking about the next five years."

Dreaming, in other words, just as it always has. Happy to suggest that it's "still the benchmark, competing with itself", Crytek isn't resting on its laurels, while the Yerlis, with their crazy mix of ingenuity and pragmatism, are as much in control as ever. As for *Crysis 2*, which we're assured will look less and less like its console rivals as it lays on extra detail, let's just say it's good to see it finally having fun, not worrying so much about being The Best Game Ever Made.

From weapons like the 'FELINE' submachine gun, 'JACKAL' auto-shotgun and 'HAMMER' – we're hoping it's the Jack Hammer shotgun from *Far Cry* – to the wealth of enemy types, suit options and encounters, this is no longer a game in which you have to find or create the fun, but one in which the fun finds you. And while much seems familiar in a world of sci-fi shooters, this game seems closer to ones anticipated but never delivered: the vast urban warfare of a *Halo* sequel, a *Resistance 2* that was actually good. And in a marked change from last time, says Camarillo, we won't have to worry about seeing it all beforehand.

"Part of the problem with *Crysis* was that there was a little too much out there before the game was released. Everyone saw almost the whole game before it came out. So in one of the early E3 demos the end boss battle was shown – an awesome moment at E3 that completely underwhelmed everyone when it actually ended the game. We shot ourselves in the foot there.

"Now we have to worry about *adding* too much because we can. That's the danger of being a really strong developer: you can lose focus on what you're trying to accomplish. But, yes, we're having fun. We know what was good about *Crysis*, what we needed to improve and what was fun about the game, and we can build on a core we no longer have to find. We can have those signature moments that only Crytek can do in realtime – those five big things you'll remember forever."

"WE KNOW WHAT WAS GOOD ABOUT CRYSIS, WHAT WE NEEDED TO IMPROVE AND WHAT WAS FUN ABOUT THE GAME"


Nothing's mentioned of the hero's identity during our visit, so we'll assume it's the first game's Nomad. Radio chatter refers to team leader Prophet, though, reminding us of a once-rumoured spin-off title, *Crysis: Prophet*






Global success since the company's formation in 1999 has propelled Crytek's three brothers – (from top) managing directors Faruk and Avni Yerli, plus company president Cevat – to stardom in Germany, notably in the lifestyle press


The relative positions of things like cars, bodies, blood trails and debris are far from random, bringing to mind the storytelling of *Half-Life* and *FEAR*

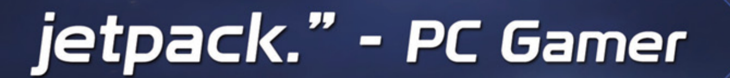
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THE FINAL FRONTIER

HOW DO YOU BRING LIFE TO A GAME FOCUSED ON THE DEATH OF THE WILD WEST? AS RED DEAD REDEMPTION PREPARES TO RIDE OUT, ROCKSTAR REVEALS ITS HAND

Is *Red Dead Revolver* popular because it's everything you'd expect of a Rockstar game, or because it isn't? Giant set-pieces, a cast of eccentrics, authentic tunes (from the late Francesco De Masi, among others, often mistaken for Ennio Morricone), and scores of obvious movie references: it certainly sounds like Rockstar. But what's this? Sharpshooting combos, flamboyant special moves and a wealth of ideas that don't always come together: now we're in Capcom territory. There's a lot of east in this 2004 western, and it's arguably better because of it. The question for its sequel, described by Rockstar as a fresh start: how much can it afford to lose?

"We tried to tune it, style it and add story touches and music so it felt like a Rockstar title, but the original wasn't a Rockstar production from the outset," explains **Rob Nelson**, art director at Rockstar San Diego. Indeed, the origins of *Red Dead Revolver* are no secret: inherited "completely unfinished" as part of the deal to buy Rockstar San Diego (then Angel Studios) in 2002, the game was beaten into shape and shipped to gamers torn by its scattershot design. "We wanted to do a sequel from the minute we started working on it," says Nelson.

That's a word you don't hear often when talking about new game *Red Dead Redemption*. If this open-world, entirely Rockstar-produced adventure is a sequel, it's a spiritual one at most. The characters, era, technology and ambitions have changed, the story now pushed to the very edge of the western, set amid its twilight years in the early 1900s. "We just wanted a period that gave us enough material in terms of both technology and society to make an interesting and epic game," says Nelson, "and this one felt the best."

Here's what you might know already. *Red Dead Redemption* is big, *GTA*-like in scope but spread across the vastness of the old west, which in this story is being steadily corralled into cities and governments. There are still outlaws and lawmen, natives and prospectors, but the needs of the country weigh heavily upon the individual, and the desire to start things over has come too late for John Marston, a reformed gunslinger left for dead by his old gang.

Three years after his lucky escape, Marston has a wife, a son named Jack, and a farm on which he plans to live

TITLE: **RED DEAD REDEMPTION** FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **ROCKSTAR GAMES** DEVELOPER: **ROCKSTAR SAN DIEGO** ORIGIN: **US** RELEASE: **APRIL 27**









Characters in *Redemption* aren't quite as good, bad and ugly as those of its predecessor, says Nelson. "They're much more morally ambiguous. The lines between good and bad, between law and outlaw, are very definitely and deliberately blurry"

out his new life. Agents from the Justice Department, though, an embryonic version of the FBI, have other plans. Little better and often worse than the people they're after, they want Marston to help track down and wipe out his former associates. A man of stubborn loyalties, he refuses, only to have his family abducted. So he takes the job, dusting off his spurs to ride one last time into a vanishing frontier.

Visiting map markers, taking missions and negotiating random events like stagecoach hold-ups, cougar attacks and pleas for help, Marston does plenty that's familiar to *GTAIV*. Is it wrong that the games are functionally similar to the point of you knowing instinctively how to 'horse-jack' someone, jump into cover or go from jogging to dashing by tapping on the button? For our money, it's nice not to have to learn a whole new control scheme.

As we take the reins ourselves, the first thing to note is that Marston looks and sounds a lot like actor Josh Brolin, though we're assured it's definitely not him. As readers of **E**187's *GTA* retrospective will recall, Rockstar now has a policy of not using celebrity voice actors, so don't expect a star-studded take on The Magnificent Seven. Yet the similarity in this case goes beyond appearances. Bringing to mind Brolin's contradictory performance as Llewelyn Moss in No Country For Old Men, Marston is by turns a dumb, cold, sharp and emotional man, much like the heroes of any *Grand Theft Auto*. Outwardly ambivalent until the second he pulls the trigger, he's the perfect choice for a game in which your paths – physical and moral – are left largely up to you. Was there an influence? Only on the story and themes, from which the character naturally evolved, says Rockstar creative vice president **Dan Houser**.

"Beyond all the real research, which involved time in photo libraries and lots of reading, the movies we were most influenced by, from a thematic perspective, were probably the more cynical anti-westerns and revisionist westerns that have emerged since the late 1960s," he explains. "Things like The Wild Bunch, Major Dundee, Unforgiven, Butch Cassidy And The Sundance Kid or High Plains Drifter, and a few earlier classics, such as The Treasure Of Sierra Madre. In addition, the original series of Lonesome Dove is epic in scope, and the books of Cormac McCarthy [author of Blood Meridian, a reported touchstone of Houser's],











Stretching from the ponderous (The Proposition) to the jocular (Butch Cassidy) to the ominous and bloody (The Wild Bunch), the game's influences are broad enough to satisfy any western fan

although dealing with different eras in the region, give a different kind of insight into the place and the mindset of its people."

People are, of course, vital to almost any open-world game. Peds, as they're often known, are naturally scarcer in *Red Dead Redemption* than in *GTAIV*, but arguably more involved. Whenever we meet one, as a mission objective or by chance, long-lasting consequences are seldom far behind.

How Marston interacts affects two gauges in *Red Dead Redemption*: Honour and Fame. Fame can only go up as his actions become known, but Honour is the moral barometer, described by Rockstar as world- rather than story-centric. Nudging it can be as simple as joining one side of a random gunfight between lawmen and bandits, or as troubling as choosing life or death for someone more developed. This extends to side-quests, too, such as when a farmer makes an impetuous bid to rescue his daughter, who's trussed up in the hideout of a local gang. Loaded with ammo and ill-gotten loot, these ruffians offer plenty to make the diversion worthwhile. And, being ruffians, they don't even bump up your Wanted level.

Another *GTA* feature? In essence, yes. Make trouble and the Wanted level rises, an enemy search radius spreading across the mini-map for you to escape. Society in *Red Dead Redemption* hasn't quite collapsed to Liberty City standards, so your notoriety sticks around a little longer. Make even more mess and wanted posters go up, posses are formed, and one way or another you'll have to pay for your crimes, whether literally or through a good deed and a pardon.

Many dynamic features – a great many, even – emerge as we visit three of the game's story missions. Some women for his boss than fire a rifle, there's always the sense that your mission, however scripted, exists in a world where anything can happen, anytime and anywhere.

In his latest bid to brown-nose Colonel Allende, apparent governor of the game's canyon-rich Nuevo Paraiso region, DeSanta is 'leading' a brutal suppression of a rebel company – by which we mean he's leaving it to you. A grubby, bellicose mix of Eli Wallach and one of the more



TRACK & FIELD

Perhaps the most encouraging feature in *Red Dead Redemption* is its ecology, the game's AI-heavy wildlife more diverse and convincing than that of *Stalker*'s A-Life system. With over 40 species wandering the prairies, observing the food chain and occasionally sinking their teeth into you, it's sure to appeal to fans of the massively successful Cabela's games, even if it makes little attempt to match their complexity. Tracking the animals is as feasible as taking random pot shots, and for non-Sarah Palin types it doesn't have to be its own reward: furs can be sold in town marketplaces or used to create new outfits, while taking out an advancing cougar is a matter of some urgency.

> "GOOD AND APPALLING LAWMEN, NASTY OUTLAWS, MEGALOMANIACS, KINDLY NUNS, AND ALL POINTS IN BETWEEN. IT'S DEFINITELY A ROCKSTAR GAME"

canter in from the hazy horizon, some wait to be found in rocks and cubbyholes, some fly overhead or scurry in the dust, and others leap from houses and wagons. Shoot an animal, for instance, and there's the option of starting a Sharpshooter mission. Interrupt a heist and you can hope for a reward or pry it from the victim's hand. As a general rule, if it moves and you shoot it, something about the gameworld will change, even if it's just the physics of a stagecoach when you take down its horse. And as we're introduced to DeSanta, a workshy bureaucrat in the Mexican Army who'd sooner seek out

vivacious crooks in *GTA*, he does as much to set the game's tone as anything in its environment. The Good, The Bad And The Ugly? More like The Good, The Bad And The Crazy. "Good and appalling lawmen, nasty outlaws, wronged women, megalomaniacs, kindly nuns, and all points in between," says Nelson. "It definitely feels like a Rockstar game."

Commanding majestic views of the region and an almost infinite draw distance, with rocks and debris scattered strategically in the foreground, the stronghold gives us our first complete look at the game's gunplay. In something of a theme,




There's no sign yet of some *Mass Effect*-style fork in Marston's journey or career. Not to say there won't be, though, thanks to the entirely suitable honour system




the systems of *GTAIV* act simply as a bedrock for those of *Red Dead Redemption*. So while you can cycle left and right between weapons, holding the bumper button invokes a petal menu for faster selection. The other bumper snaps to cover, and an evolved lock-on system makes flicking between targets a whole lot easier.

That's important because damaging enemies quickly, widely and accurately powers up Deadeye, the slow-motion combo system at the heart of the series. Starting the game with just basic slo-mo, the rusty Marston soon finds his aim, unlocking the ability to 'paint' his targets before peppering them with fire. To recap: during Deadeye, moving the reticule over anything flesh-and-blood leaves tags on it, each of which gets a bullet when the slo-mo expires. Five heads, a dozen limbs or a full posse: anything is possible with accuracy and time.

So to answer that opening question, Rockstar needn't worry about losing *Red Dead Revolver*'s spark because, however it chooses to define the term 'sequel', it has abandoned very little. You can take the game out of Capcom, it seems, but you can't take Capcom out of the game, even when you rebuild it from scratch.

The next mission is one of those favour-for-a-favour types that Rockstar does so well. In the bustling town of Armadillo, where NPCs lead lives that revolve around the game's day/night cycle, moving from job and workplace to downtime and bar, Marston's on the hunt for Bill Williamson, one of the associates on the Justice Department's list. Inconveniently, the mere mention of the name strikes the townspeople dumb, so it's on to the office of cheroot-chomping Sheriff Johnson.

"THERE'S A WHOLE HOST OF ACTIVITIES – HERDING CATTLE, PEST CONTROL, HELPING PROTECT LIVESTOCK – WHICH CONTRAST WELL WITH THE VERY INTENSE ACTION"

Seeing the chance to get his own house in order, Johnson hires you for a brief trek into the wilderness, to the stomping ground of a small-time crook.

This time, it's the bit before the combat that's on show: a horseback ride that welcomes another *GTA* feature into *Red Dead Redemption*, this time from episode *The Lost And Damned*. Hold down a button while keeping pace with the sheriff and you'll form a convoy, leaving you free to appreciate the conversation. The dialogue, it's confirmed, will change if you have to restart the mission. Thankfully more *Assassin's Creed* than *Shadow Of The Colossus*, the riding is a simple and enjoyable affair – remarkable, even, for its attention to detail. Spooked by anything from a gunshot to a snake, tiring when pushed and even landing you on your backside when taken too far, these mo-capped creatures move and behave authentically. They seem perfectly happy with your own gunfire, though, which is just as well as you can fire freely from the saddle.

Culminating in a more open shootout and a test of character – do you shoot to kill the villain or, as Johnson would prefer, cripple him? – it's a slower mission than before, rich with character development and time to absorb the marvellous detail lavished upon Marston's outfit, his 'physicalised' weapons jangling with every step. But just how slow will *Red Dead Redemption* get? It is a western, after all, some of which feature silences as epic as their scenery, then explode without warning.

"There's definitely intentional variation in the pacing," says Nelson. "We're hoping to give people an insight into that shortly. There's a whole host of activities, many solitary, that we've not said much about, like helping out with the management of a ranch – herding cattle, pest control, helping to protect the livestock and so on – which contrast really well with the very intense action. They're methodically placed to affect the pacing and mood of certain sections."

In all likelihood, players will take more than a few moments of their own to bring the action to a standstill. Whatever your focus, be it a filthy set



LEGEND'S HAD IT

Having done "an obscene amount of first-hand research" for *GTAIV*, Houser and his colleagues throughout the Rockstar network are taking no shortcuts here. "With a game set in the old west, people's opinions of that time are so completely formed, coloured, and distorted by movies, books and TV shows that it's impossible to get a grasp on whether what you've experienced through media is even historically accurate," Houser says. "As a hybrid of myth and history, how we see the west is a reflection of the times in which we live, as much as of the west itself. To understand this better, we tried to combine a love of western fiction with some detailed historical and geographical research – so that the game looks and feels like the real west interlaced with the west from the films that we loved in a way we found exciting, and which gave us something interesting to say."









There was never a question of not including multiplayer. "Open-world multiplayer is a big new frontier," says Nelson, "and we're excited to be showcasing its next evolution"

of teeth or a mountain range an hour's ride away, *Red Dead Redemption* is an awesome-looking game. Not perfect, by any means, and some of the quirks of *GTAIV* look set to return in one form or other, but spectacular in its scope. A primordial landscape that takes the game far from that other open-world western, *Fallout 3*, it draws waypoints as far as the eye can see, frying them with sunbeams that turn people into silhouettes. It's a virtual world of immeasurable natural power, viewed from angles that leave you wondering what's over every hill.

It's also, we discover, the world that Rockstar's RAGE engine was built for, as hinted by its unofficial reveal at E3 2005, where it was simply dubbed *Untitled Western Shooter*. Describing the "bunch of different engines" used by Rockstar's PS2-era games, Nelson goes on to explain how the purchase of Renderware by EA prompted consolidation, the result being tech that debuted with 2007's *Rockstar Games Presents Table Tennis*. "The team's based in San Diego and the work is very much ongoing, so the engine's constantly evolving," Nelson explains. "*Red Dead* has definitely benefited from being in the same building – the co-operation has been awesome. But I think all of our games on this generation of hardware have looked pretty amazing, especially given the scale of them."

Hoping to prove that the scale extends to story missions as well, the third we're shown involves a drunk Irishman, a Gatling gun, the hostile Gaptooth Ridge, kegs of TNT, and the inventive use of a mine cart as a mobile shield. And, no, it's not a mounted gun level. Marston needs the gun to lay siege to a fort, and Irish (that's his name) owes him his life after a previous mission. He's also as reliable as a rifle loaded with sand, so while his directions prove sound, his promise of a flatbed getaway cart is less convincing.

Largely confined to interiors and close-quarters combat, favouring shotgun blasts from behind cover, this is actually the least enjoyable of the missions, though at least it sticks to the golden rule: don't make the player leave via the entrance. It also showcases the frazzling effect of moving from dark to blazing sunshine, and deserves to be taken in context: this is just one small stop on a map larger than that of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, and potentially even more enthralling.

There's that game name again, for the tenth time in an article not about *Grand Theft Auto* (11). The similarities are as common as they are inevitable, sure to be used by some as a bludgeon in case the game falls short. Perhaps the question isn't how much of *Red Dead Revolver* the game can afford to lose, but how much of *GTA* (12) it can afford to gain. The answer, and maybe a staggering amount more, lies just over that hill.

An audience with…

Ed Fries

Why the man who established Microsoft Game Studios turned his hand to making World Of Warcraft figurines

Though he began his programming career working on Word and Excel, **Ed Fries** began to make his name in entertainment software creating the Fish! screensaver for Berkley Systems' iconic After Dark, though it's not his proudest achievement. You'll know him for leading Microsoft's firstparty game publishing division at the launch of Xbox. In other words, it's largely down to Fries that *Halo* appeared on the platform, and he was also heavily responsible for the purchase of Rare and the now-defunct Ensemble Studios, and the 'games for gamers' culture that helped seal Xbox's fortunes for the past nine years.

"We don't reach half the World Of Warcraft players now. We need to get to Asia, and that's an important thing I've been working on"

And what might a man who set up one of the world's most important game publishing businesses do on leaving in January 2004? Play a lot of *World Of Warcraft*. But it's not that he's just been messing around. Fries' virtual pursuits have lead to a business venture, now two years old, 'printing' 3D models of *WOW* players' avatars. He and his team have now shipped 20,000 personalised FigurePrints around the world, but Fries maintains an active role in the intangible world of videogames, too, advising developers and serving on the boards of various tech startups.

We talk to him as he prepares a presentation for May's Rapid/3D Imaging conference about his journey into creating a business out of transforming the bits and bytes of an MMOG into something you can hold in your hand, his views on the Xbox of today, and the interactive entertainment of tomorrow.

How did FigurePrints come about?
I was at E3 in 2006 and got a chance to play with *Spore*'s Creature Creator there. I was familiar with 3D printing but I'd never seen 3D colour printing before, so I was really fascinated by their display of figurines made from creatures made in the game. They sent me one and it kind of sat on my desk while I was playing *World Of Warcraft*, and then one day I got the idea, "Hey! I could do this for *World Of Warcraft*!" I was really far into the development of FigurePrints before I found out that EA was actually going to bring *Spore* figurines to market, but we got there about a year before they did.

Does that make FigurePrints the first 3D printed game figurine product?
There was one other guy I found out about, once I contacted [Blizzard founder and president] Michael Morhaime to talk about this crazy idea. It was doing Second Life avatars, but it was kind of all done by hand – the guy had to meet you in the game and walk around you and record you and stuff like that.

So how closely do you work with Blizzard on FigurePrints?
We've been working with Blizzard from the start. Their Armory servers recognise that it's us asking for data on the character models and they give us some extra data that's not available to anyone else. That's basically information about the face, face colour, skin colour, hairstyle, things like that.

Do you get much additional support from within Blizzard?
Blizzard's been a great partner. I've known Michael Morhaime for many years and actually tried to acquire Blizzard a couple of times when I was running Microsoft's games business, so I know him from then.

How does it all work?
Well, it helps that I'm a programmer by training. A big help was that there was a group of fans who had created an open-source project called the WOW Model Viewer. So I started with that technology and just started modifying it to do what we needed – the export code had a bunch of problems, I modified the rendering code to be more accurate, and basically I've just maintained that program and kept it up to date.

What's the program capable of doing?
It sucks models out of the *World Of Warcraft* data, dresses a character up using the data from the Armory, and then exports a 3D model of the posed character. That's where my second partner comes in, Rick Welsh. He imports it into 3D



Since leaving Microsoft in 2004, Fries has worked with the likes of physics hardware specialist Ageia, but his key interest today is FigurePrints (www.figureprints.com)

Studio Max with a script of 15,000 lines now, which takes the data and modifies it so it's printable. It does things like smooth the body – the bodies would otherwise look very polygonal. It extrudes parts that are too thin, like capes. It actually has to generate geometry for things like hair. So it's pretty sophisticated, pretty *WOW*-specific code.

All these pieces are glued together by a bunch of web server-side code that the third in our group, a man called Greg Link, wrote. He does all our database, backend, order processing, accounting stuff, moves orders through the different queues and to our factory up in Vancouver, run by Dan Iosch. There we have our bank of 3D printers, which run constantly and produce the physical object.

How did you start out?
Actually, we started with just one printer, working out of the loft of Dan's sign-printing business. We've moved three times since then – now we have a 5,000-square-foot facility, so since January 2009 we've been able to take orders on an on-demand basis, so we've been able to get rid of that lottery that we had during the first year.

Before then you had big waiting lists?
Yeah, when we initially launched we had probably made 50 or so figures. We did a small beta test with my guild. So it was important that we throttle the demand, because we were learning as we were growing. And we had a deal with Dell, something that Blizzard drove around a *World Of Warcraft* laptop. Their idea was every one of these laptops would come with a golden ticket that let you buy a FigurePrint. And since we didn't know if they were going to sell hundreds or tens of thousands of these laptops, it was little scary.

What is it about *WOW* for you?
For me, I certainly had a personal connection, and the whole MMOG space has been a particular interest of mine. I played it from the beta, and I could see that this game was going to be a huge hit – it was just so much better than anything that had come before it. You can put your business hat on and say, it's obviously the biggest MMOG in the world – there are a lot of customers out there and they're passionate. They spend a lot of time with their characters and so they mean a lot to them – I mean, you have to care a lot about your character to want to spend $129 [£80] for a statue of it.

But that business argument isn't really authentic – the true answer is that I was a big player of the game and I just thought it was something cool. I thought: 'Wow, what if I could take these things out of the virtual world and bring them into the real world using this technology?' I spend time with them through my computer screen, but what if I could hold them in my hand?

Are you interested in extending FigurePrints to other games?
We've been approached by a lot of different game companies and we're experimenting on some things. I don't know yet if any of them are going to work out, and we could do more with *WOW*. There are certainly things people really want us to do, like hunter pets, and mounted characters are something we've talked about in the past. It's always easier for us to do something more with *WOW*, and the audience is so big it's hard to find another equivalent.

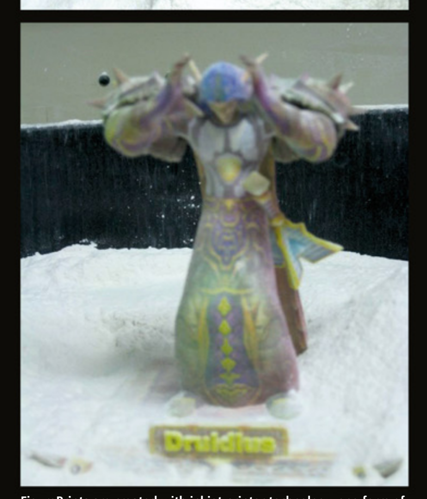
If you did expand, the company would have to expand in turn. Is that something you want to happen?
I mean, we don't even reach half the *World Of Warcraft* players now. We need to get to Asia, and that's an important thing that I've been doing some work on. So sometime this year we'll be in Korea and Taiwan, and then hopefully after that into mainland Asia. To the question you just asked – yeah, that's something I ask myself. I'm involved in a lot of different things in the gaming business still, but this is the one thing that I spend the most time on every day, but I like the fact that it's a part-time job. For all of us it's that way. We all live in different areas, we meet over Skype, there are no employees – it's very much a virtual company. And it's nice, we like the lifestyle that we have around running the company. Would we want to turn it into something that was all-consuming? Personally, I wouldn't. I'd probably have to hire someone to do my job if it came to pass.

What does expanding into Asia entail?
We've gotten pretty good at global shipping, so we build everything in Vancouver and we can ship anywhere in the world. So at least for Korea and Taiwan, we're very likely to continue that. The biggest problem we have is actually just accepting payment. There isn't so much of a credit card culture there, and so we need to work with local payment providers to be able to accept local currency. There are some other issues around localising the website, and I did some work a few months ago to be able to handle character sets and the correct fonts. And we need to work with the local Blizzard subsidiary to launch, because we need their support with marketing.

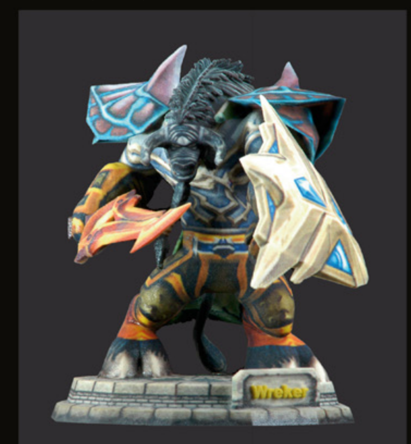
Given your previous connections, would you ever produce figures of Xbox 360 Avatars?
You know, I had some discussions on similar







FigurePrints are created with inkjet printer technology, one form of 3D printing. Coloured adhesive is sprayed on successive fine layers of plaster or corn starch powder, slowly building up the figurine and colouring it as it goes. It's then hardened with a soak in resin



things, but right now the costs of 3D printing are pretty high, so there may not be enough connection between a person and their Avatar to make the business big enough. You kind of see that with *Rock Band*. They tried to do 3D printed characters and it was another case where there isn't as huge a connection with your character as there is in a MMOG. I don't mean to say that there's no business there, but I don't think it's anywhere near as compelling as a game like *WOW* where people literally spend 40-plus hours a week living with their characters. So that's the thing that holds me back from some of the other obvious opportunities. If we could do what we're doing for $20 [£12] instead of $130, then maybe it would be an equation – but that technology just doesn't exist.

You used to be on the board for PhysX's Ageia, which is now owned by Nvidia.
I'm not on that many company boards right now, but Ageia was a great experience for me. I joined right after I left Microsoft, and it was the first time I'd been on a board. I got to see the whole life cycle of a startup, from raising money through multiple rounds and bringing a product to market and ultimately being acquired by Nvidia. It was very educational for me to sit around the table with a bunch of venture capitalists and learn how they talk and be part of that community.

But you're still involved in advising various game companies, right?
They're usually either run by friends, or friends of mine work there. Dhruva Interactive is a developer in India. Timeplay, they present games in movie theatres. Big Stage, they take pictures of faces and turn them into digital representations that they can insert into movies. They do cool stuff. Anyway, there are probably a dozen or so companies.

You seem to have held on to your interest in gaming's frontiers, from technology to new pools of talent, like India with Dhruva.
I like working with smart people, trying to solve hard problems, cool technology, that's fun for me. I definitely try to lean towards gaming-related things. I was asked to teach on gaming in India, and that was really fun for me, to see that culture.

What do you think about the gaming scene there? Have you seen any culturally specific games coming out of the region yet?
You know, there's no doubt in my mind that it's going to happen there. I don't know when, but I'm old enough in the business to remember people saying all these things about China – that, culturally, parents in China weren't going to let their kids play games and so on. But what happened in China happened very quickly and it really caught western companies by surprise. And by the time they tried to get in they were too late. Local companies really dominated – Korean companies, and then Chinese companies. And I think the same thing is likely to happen in India. It's going to look quiet, as if there isn't much going on, and then it's just going to explode. And if people aren't in there now, it's going to be too late for them to get in later.

You were always known at Microsoft for championing what might be called gamers' games. What do you think of Microsoft's recent attempts to broaden Xbox 360's appeal, with the likes of *Lips* and Natal?
I haven't had any personal experience with Natal yet. But I thought the vision piece that they did at E3 was quite compelling. I was encouraged by it – I mean, the 360 has had a fair amount of innovation from a software point of view, particularly in Live. I think they've really been driving online gaming. But from a hardware point of view, I don't think the platform's particularly innovative. So Natal's showing that Microsoft can be innovative in hardware as well as software, and so I like that.

How big a step forward do you think it represents for game interaction?
What I think you're going to find is that all these new interfaces – and you can already see this with Wii – when you try to use them with existing gaming styles, they don't do very well. Playing *Zelda* on the Wii – I'd rather have a regular controller. But then there's *Wii Sports Resort*, where you're playing something that you wouldn't have otherwise. So I guess my point is that new interfaces demand new game styles – I don't think that's super-controversial.

That's going to be the key to whether something like Natal succeeds – can they get great, innovative game designers to think hard about this platform and develop content that's really specific to what it does well? I don't want to play *Gears Of War* by walking around my living room, you know what I mean? It's early days for Natal, but I think it's the right way for them to be headed. I think Wii shows that the best way to reach a broader audience isn't just to try to do new games on old hardware, it's to do new games on new hardware. Hopefully that's going to work out for them. I've got a lot of old friends over there, and I'd like to see them be successful.

Do you think that Microsoft currently has the far-seeing, far-reaching talent to create those kinds of games?
Well, certainly having people like Peter Molyneux, as somebody who I think we all respect greatly, would just be one example of the people they work with. There is definitely a lot of talent there. Will Microsoft's political situation let them have the freedom they need and the resources they need to do great work? I hope so. You know, likewise they could go out and work with lots of thirdparty developers, and there are lots of talented thirdparty developers and designers out there who could look at helping with this.

You gave Live as an example of the Xbox's greatest innovation – did what Live is today, a full entertainment and social platform accessed through the TV, exist in concept when you were at Microsoft?
Yeah, I think if you go back and listen to some of the speeches at E3 back in the day, particularly what Robbie [Bach] said, he was always talking about it being a broader platform for entertainment and not just for games. For me, because my focus was so much around games, I didn't always like it when he said that! Because, if anything, my mission has been to try to show that games are a superior form of entertainment to other forms of entertainment. I want games to be bigger than movies someday, and we've made a lot of progress in that direction. And sometimes that puts me in a position of exaggerating my point of view. There's really nothing wrong with TV, there's nothing wrong with movies. I watch both and enjoy them. But when you're trying to build a new form of entertainment you kind of have to be a snob about it and say: "This is the most important one, and we think it's going to be bigger than everything else". That was harder to do ten or 15 years ago; now, if I say that in speeches, people are kind of like: "*Durr*..." Games are bigger than music already – there's only TV and movies left, and I think we'll probably be the biggest entertainment business, ultimately.

"My mission has been to try to show that games are a superior form of entertainment. I want games to be bigger than movies someday"

THE WORLDS OF WARCRAFT

A SURVEY OF THE LANDSCAPE AND LIFE FORMS THAT MADE BLIZZARD'S MMOG THE GAME OF THE DECADE

Few games inspire the kind of deep nostalgia created by *World Of Warcraft*. Fewer still can make a playerbase so socially and culturally diverse as *WOW*'s reminisce so fondly at a past that's only five years old.

What are they nostalgic for? Everything and everything. Their characters' youths, a first sunrise over a tropical beach, taking down Ragnaros, claiming ramshackle victory in an inter-faction brawl, buying a mount, cornering the heavy stone market on the auction house, a six-hour stalemate in Alterac Valley, making some goggles, larking around in Stormwind City, guild in-jokes and lapsed friends.

World Of Warcraft's blend of adventure and challenge, work and play, competition and co-operation is many things to many, many people. That constantly shifting mix has seen its growth as the world's most popular subscription MMORPG and its almost immediate investiture as the benchmark for the genre. But *WOW* also blazed a trail for a business model which was a blueprint for the future, transforming the videogame from fleeting pleasure to lingering relationship.

That relationship, a pact in which players part with a monthly subscription in return for the promise of constant improvement and new additions, is also one of the biggest reasons why old timers can never recapture their formative experiences in Azeroth. The world they first stepped into has long since irrevocably changed, whether because Blizzard has hardwired change through tweaks to its ruleset and topography, or because of the ever-shifting nature of player culture.

The truth, of course, is that those two facets of *WOW*'s development – culture and rules – are indelibly interlinked. The vast, sprawling endeavour which we have named our game of the decade could never have been planned in a single stroke. Instead, *WOW* has incrementally and iteratively grown since the opening of its closed beta on March 19, 2004, to fit and reflect the behaviour and needs of its players through nearly 100 patches.

But the game's fundamental philosophy has remained the same – one of accessibility and deep-seated choice – deliberately leading players through the heady complexities of both geography and Gordian mechanics. These two properties





make *WOW* utterly distinct from the MMORPGs which preceded it and ensure a lasting popularity which has seen its subscription base rise to over 11.5 million. But they've also fuelled tensions in its design and playerbase which continue to creak behind the stylised surface today.

Let's begin our survey of *WOW*, however, with the world that new players enter. It's a world ruled by the now-iconic exclamation and question marks, *WOW*'s symbol for the presence of quests. Indeed, for the huge majority of *WOW* players, the game can be boiled down to being a dense network of such punctuation, crisscrossing the expressively realised land.

Though they might seem facile, an asinine icon which only leads to the bland command to kill 20 boars in return for a new pair of gloves, they provide guidance and direction in a genre which before *WOW* had tended to unceremoniously shove players out into the wilds to fend for themselves.

Most players click through their texts, but missing the details hardly obscures the gently expressed background stories for each race. You're soon aware of the forces acting upon them, stories of local disputes and incursions, sparse resources and indigenous customs. The Orcs and Trolls, for instance, have somehow carved a flyblown homeland for themselves in the Barrens, an achievement against a harsh environment that's crowned by the hulking grandeur of Orgrimmar, their capital. The Forsaken are the risen dead, humans killed by a plague summoned by the Lich King and intended to become members of his Scourge, but who have freed themselves and must balance their hatred for life with their need for survival in a world which hates them. The Night Elves face the destruction of their lands by the armies of the Burning Legion, which have corrupted their forest.

Levels later, the quests slowly reveal the international picture of two vast powers, the Horde and the Alliance, on the brink of full war, and of your faction's place within them. And then, still later, even worse threats – the demonic Burning Crusade and the Lich King's dead army, which force unsteady alliance between the factions and will pervade almost everything you see and do for the rest of the game.

Though set in high fantasy, *WOW*'s lore is



Azeroth has expanded since launch, its two original continents, Kalimdor (left) and Eastern Kingdoms (right), joined by icy Northrend with *Wrath Of The Lich King*. Not pictured is the extra-dimensional Outland











Players are awed by their first visits to cities, including Thunder Bluff (above right) and Orgrimmar (right). Dalaran (above) still causes level 80s to marvel

colourful, playful, dramatic and rich, and it's most eloquently expressed by the land itself: by its scars and monuments, its contrasts and atmospheres. The change in the trees from the diseased and ragged Silverpine Forest to the pastoral neighbouring Hillsbrad Foothills. The vast crater where the city of Dalaran stood before October 2008's *Wrath Of The Lich King* expansion, wreathed in purple smoke and still inscribed by the rune which tore it from its seating. Undercity, the Forsaken's capital, which lies below the sacked city of Lordaeron – to get to its entrance you must run through the now broken throne room and halls which featured in *Warcraft III*'s cinematics.

Hillsbrad Foothills, in particular, is a beautiful example of harmony between environment, *WOW*'s story and its quest design. Horde players generally first visit the zone at the behest of an errand at around level 19. Entering from the west, they must reach the Horde town Tarren Mill, which lies right on the other side – before them is a long, straight road. On its northern edge are fields populated by human farmers of between level 22 and 26, while wandering bears stray on to the road itself. The journey, then, is a fraught affair of desperately avoiding attention and being harried by considerably more powerful foes.

WOW'S LORE IS COLOURFUL, PLAYFUL, DRAMATIC AND RICH, AND MOST ELOQUENTLY EXPRESSED BY THE LAND ITSELF: BY ITS SCARS AND MONUMENTS

For most weary new arrivals, Tarren Mill will become a base for the next ten levels at least, and they arrive harbouring a grudge against all the mobs that made their journey so hard. As luck would have it, they're soon given a series of quests which have them exacting revenge, their powers slowly rising as they take them on. In other words, this outwardly simple scenario cleverly provides the challenge which feeds a player's motivation.

Wrath Of The Lich King, armed with new tech and years of experience, has the best stories, though. Its new class, the Death Knight, features starting quests which follow the journey of a champion of the Lich King's armies, beginning with a merciless attack on a human town. Players therefore begin on the side of the enemy, terrorising the innocent and raising their dead to fight for them. Smartly, Blizzard implemented new technology in the expansion which enables players to see the land change to reflect their actions as their campaign progresses.

Towards its end, they find themselves part of a vast force of the Scourge which is turned back by a small force of Argent Dawn defenders. The resulting drama has players facing the evil they've wrought and turning to oppose the Lich King, with the sequence ending in a shaming walk through Stormwind, the human capital city, being pelted with rotten food and spat upon by its inhabitants.

Not that *WOW* often forces you to engage with any of its lore. The quests might articulate the stories which painstakingly support pretty much every landmark in the game, but they're also carefully instructing players in a lot more than that. A world the size of Azeroth hides a profusion of subtle and intricate systems, from the mechanics of getting around to

FELLOWSHIP OF THE DING

Joining a guild becomes increasingly important as you rise in level, their populations an important source of item resources, advice and companions for group play. Like any social structures, guilds are subject to infighting and general communal strife, and guild leaders and officers often find themselves signing up for rather more administration than they might have bargained for in order to maintain their smooth running. *WOW*'s in-game guild management interface isn't particularly flexible or full featured, which means that most guilds of any note establish websites outside the game for forums and voice comms hosting to operate effectively, a curious and lingering oversight in Blizzard's UI design.



navigating the auction house for fun and profit, the reputation system and the elaborate and detailed professions.

Most of all, though, the quests help train you in combat itself. Every class is furnished with a vast array of abilities across various skill trees, each presenting a new set of possibilities for battle tactics. Far from its simplistic appearance, *WOW*'s combat is a fantastically deep balancing act, with every situation, from enemy type to party composition, requiring a specific technique.

Each class is cleanly differentiated, presenting very different designs, from the shape-shifting (and therefore role-shifting) Druid to the frontline, pestilential, enemy-pulling Death Knight. But let's take the Hunter, who specialises in strong ranged attacks and has a pet to hold enemies at a distance. Learning how to use that pet effectively, ensuring it doesn't 'pull' more enemies than you intend, and that it protects you from harm while you ensure you don't do so much damage that you attract the enemy's attention, is a delicate art that takes repetition to perfect. The Hunter's many abilities range from shots and traps, which can cause damage over time and status effects that slow enemy speeds, to moves that help you escape harm, from playing dead to leaping back. Each holds special purposes, whether useful for group play, against other players or for lone battling. Indeed, good players can appear almost acrobatic, moving between the rhythm of their shots to avoid breaking its steady pulse, skipping out of melee range of enemies while firing out a barrage of stings and shots. At its highest level, *WOW* combat isn't so dissimilar to *Street Fighter* as its aesthetics might suggest.

Consequently, what outsiders view as grinding is actually a matter of honing. *WOW* is actually a lot more about experience than it is XP – players with deep knowledge and skill can easily outplay their stats. In fact, *WOW* was always designed to discourage grinding – note its rest mechanic, which awards characters who have recently spent hours 'resting' (in other words, logged out) in inns and cities with double the normal XP for kills. And on top of that, Blizzard made levelling between 20 and 60 faster in November 2007's 2.3 patch.

Moreover, you quickly realise that the game is tuned to provide gain for even the shortest play sessions, whether it's to mount a quick expedition to gather ore or plants, build a few trinkets or browse the auction house. Indeed, Blizzard has actively reduced the time investment of the most demanding facets of the game – the raids and Battlegrounds – reducing their extents, from the physical sizes of dungeons and the maximum size of raids to the team sizes in Battleground PvP, all to cut back on waiting, frustration and the old alienating need to set hours aside to meaningfully participate.

Naturally, you still hear players complain – particularly of a lull between levels 40 and 60, a period which sits between the flurry of novelty at lower levels and the newer, shinier content of the *Burning Crusade* and *Wrath Of The Lich King* expansions. But, arguably, the lull is actually more to do with the game finally taking away its careful guiding hand and asking you to strike out for yourself by scattering quest goals across Azeroth. The resulting explorations into the unknown indeed slow your numerical progress, but in return your knowledge of the world expands – a reminder of why, really, you're meant to be there.

The result of the many subtle philosophies underlying *WOW*'s fundamental design was a game which

GOOD PLAYERS CAN APPEAR ALMOST ACROBATIC. HIGH-LEVEL WOW COMBAT ISN'T SO DISSIMILAR TO STREET FIGHTER AS ITS AESTHETICS SUGGEST


Blizzard has continually refined the process of finding groups to play with, from dedicated chat channels to the Looking For Group tool in December 2006's 2.0.1 patch, to Dungeon Finder in December 2009's 3.3











Two additions supporting *WOW*'s social functions are achievements, which seal bragging rights, and a calendar, which notes realm-wide seasonal events as well as those of your guild's. Both were introduced in *Wrath Of The Lich King*'s 3.0.2 patch in October 2008

in 2005 seemed incredible – a massively multiplayer game which felt resolutely singleplayer. Consider also that *WOW* shipped without PvP other than allowing players to stage impromptu Alliance versus Horde battles. It was a deeply controversial stance – the future of the MMOG was surely encapsulated by *Eve Online*, which since May 2003 had been quietly demonstrating the emergent potential of a game almost entirely built from player interaction. And here was Blizzard taking the limelight and a whole raft of subscriptions with an MMORPG you didn't even need to play with others.

PvP only slowly developed from this clumsy beginning, clearly a secondary pursuit compared to the wealth Blizzard had applied to *WOW*'s PvE. And yet, despite its ramshackle nature, *WOW*'s early PvP has a knack of making a surprising number of early *WOW* players dewy-eyed. Unstructured and fundamentally fruitless they might have been, but the spontaneous battles which tended to erupt in hotspots like Hillsbrad Foothills and Crossroads on server after server were expressions of the massively multiplayer bit of the whole MMORPG thing *WOW* was meant to be. Players talk of the sense of community and life in the large spats that would flare up – perhaps conveniently forgetting the awful lag and framerates that would ensue.

Vast and chaotic, the battles rarely involved prowess – one side would build a large force and rush the enemy, a tactic labelled by many, in a nod to *StarCraft*, as a 'Zerg' rush. They also tended to be rather one-sided. The most notorious were Hillsbrad Foothills' clashes between Southshore and Tarren Mill, the result of an Alliance town being situated close to a Horde one, where Alliance players tended to be of a slightly higher level than the Horde's. Regularly, players would find the towns' NPCs killed as soon as they spawned, so they couldn't turn in quests or use vendors, while the local chat channel would be unusably filled with automated messages proclaiming "Tarren Mill is under attack!"

Those days are long gone. The Honor system, brought in with patch 1.4 in April 2005, only gave incentives to 'honourable kills' – those of players within five levels of the killer – and helped discourage some of the senseless slaughter which frustrated many players.

Blizzard began to add specific PvP instances, called Battlegrounds, in June of the same year, a clear wish to represent the world at large in the competitive game. The first were Alterac Valley and Warsong Gulch, story-driven scenarios which play out on large maps, instanced out from the main world, with allied and enemy NPCs and monsters roving the land as well as the opposing team. Warsong Gulch is essentially a capture-the-flag game between Night Elves and Orcs, while Alterac Valley is a rather more complex affair, a large map charting a conflict between Orcs and Dwarves in which each side must reduce the enemy's 'reinforcement' value to zero by destroying towers and bunkers, killing

enemy players or by conquering the enemy general, a powerful boss whose death instantly wins the game.

Alterac Valley is a fascinating example of how *WOW* has metamorphosed over time. It opened with 40-a-side matches, a reflection of circa-2005 ideals for multiplayer games – more players meant a better game. But the reality was less than ideal. Players were subject to long waits to amass each side before matches began, which could devolve into stalemates lasting many hours, a clash with Blizzard's drive to accessibility. Since that early incarnation, Alterac Valley has been simplified and streamlined – June 2006's patch 1.11 removed many of the NPCs who would impede players' progress through the map, leading to what's become called (again) 'the Zerg', a race in which each side simply runs straight to the enemy's general in order to try and kill it first.

As such, for all Blizzard's attempts to ground Alterac Valley in lore and align it with the rest of the game by creating quests in which players must visit locations inside the region to find special items, participants have largely abstracted and formalised it into the form of an easily won – or lost – match. As such it remains extremely popular, and the *WOW* playerbase quickly noted that, per hour, the Zerg tactic provides more Honor and tokens, which can be redeemed for special equipment, than playing the map according to its narrative-based context.

Further abstraction of Blizzard's carefully wrought world-building comes with the Arena, *WOW*'s other main PvP gametype. These player deathmatches, based on teams of 2v2, 3v3 and 5v5, even allow players to square up to members of their own faction and are part of a comparatively new aspiration Blizzard has developed for *WOW* – to develop its potential as an eSports platform. Many players, however, question its tenuous relationship with the rest of the game, with many items and certain abilities useful in Arenas being redundant elsewhere.

But it's not as if such abstractions aren't also present elsewhere in *WOW*. Look to the way its official interface has changed over the years since release. Though it somehow remains elegant, it's steadily been conveying more and more information – the buffs on characters, the targets characters are focused on, and alerts for target changes, party health and many others. These appear alongside newer features – a calendar and the frequently refined Dungeon Finder (previously the Looking For Group tool).

WOW's many interface addons, made by third parties, can in extreme cases make the game look like a cross between financial software and a NORAD display. Addons sometimes clash with Blizzard's quest-making – the enormously popular Questhelper, for instance, points out the direction and distance of quest goals with a large coloured arrow, an exceedingly helpful tool that nevertheless removes all mystery from adventuring. And yet Blizzard surely looks to addons as expressions of players' needs. For instance, you can see aspects of Cartographer, which displayed quest goals on a tweaked version of the official map, in *WOW*'s latest patch, December's 3.3. Not that we'll ever see anything as lore-dodging as any aspects of Questhelper.

Deeper still in *WOW*'s interface is its command line and macro system, a powerful way of tweaking settings or performing complex tasks such as automatically turning down graphical detail levels to maintain framerates when entering busy cities like Dalaran, sending out automatic 'Gratz!' responses to guildmates gaining new achievements, or activating sequences of abilities during combat. Unofficial *WOW* websites are filled with obscure scripts for

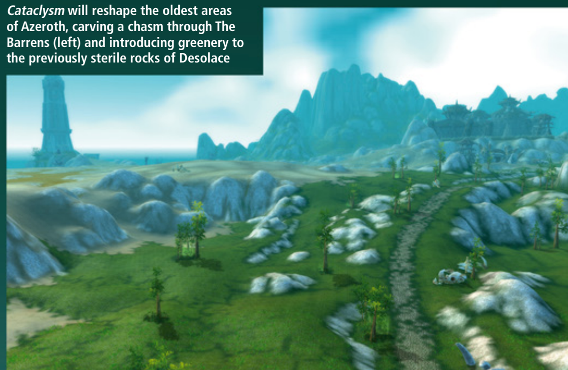

Player Avinaras' screenshot shows one of the many fights during the notorious Southshore versus Tarren Mill wars, with one faction facing the other. Full battle looked more chaotic





Cataclysm will reshape the oldest areas of Azeroth, carving a chasm through The Barrens (left) and introducing greenery to the previously sterile rocks of Desolace



advanced tactics during play. Though Blizzard has restricted the parameters under which scripts can behave – they can't employ data on target distance or health levels to automate still further – they still remove a good deal of direct control over the game.

The abstraction that's endemic in modern *WOW* is, of course, a product of its maturity.

Most veteran players have stripped away the game's veneer of lore and metaphor until they're just playing the numbers and the beautiful systems that govern them. That without its fantasy dressing *WOW* can retain a deep and lasting hold over its players shows the quality of its essential game design, from the combat mechanics to the dungeons. And it's Blizzard's management of this significant population, while always considering the impact on the accessible part of the design philosophy *WOW* was built upon, which sets it apart from most developers. For all the attention Blizzard gives to the end-game players, the early game still continues to become more accessible and compulsive to play.

FOR ALL THE ATTENTION BLIZZARD GIVES END-GAME PLAYERS, THE EARLY GAME CONTINUES TO BECOME MORE ACCESSIBLE AND COMPULSIVE

That said, being a low-level character is very different to what it used to be. Many dedicated players are high level, leaving the areas catering to lower levels relatively barren. While the floating city of Dalaran, which serves Northrend, the high-level continent that was added to the game with *Wrath Of The Lich King*, is busy and vibrant on most servers, cities like Silvermoon, the capital of the Blood Elves, tend to be quiet. Many lower-level characters are alts of experienced players, too, so there are few truly fresh faces around, wild with wonder at the world around them. Today, therefore, the game up until level 70 feels subdued.

But you can't help feeling that both Blizzard and those old players playing the numbers game want some of the old excitement, and their innocence, back, and for all of Azeroth to hold significance for them again. And that's precisely what Blizzard is addressing with its upcoming expansion, *Cataclysm*. With the concept of an event rending the land and transforming zones from verdant to desolate, bleak to lush, the expansion will also remake quests, applying to the existing, comparatively creaky old content the dynamism and story-heavy nature of those in *Lich King*.

In other words, *Cataclysm* is how Blizzard plans to transform all of Azeroth, based on all it has learned since 2004. Indeed, you have to wonder whether remaking the world in such an extreme manner is the only way Blizzard could breathe new life into it. Surely many old players will roll new characters – including *Cataclysm*'s two new races, the Worgen and Goblins – and begin again, knowing that ahead of them lies something at once fresh and everything they already love about the game.

They say nostalgia is a reflection of a culture that has no future and is forced to look to its past for comfort. That doesn't hold for *WOW*. There's still no sign of any new MMORPG truly challenging *WOW*'s hegemony, but still, *Cataclysm* is a sign that Blizzard is fully engaged in making its future as bright as its past. As we said in the citation for our choice of *WOW* as game of the decade, no other title is as likely to be the game of the next decade, too.

GRAFT FOR GRATZ

The main drivers for *WOW*'s economy are the professions, a series of skills, including mining, engineering, jewelcrafting and herbalism, which allow players to gather, build and augment items. The principle is simple: by learning recipes and building proficiency levels players gain access to higher-level work and therefore better and more lucrative items. The way each profession is interwoven with its fellows to encourage trade and communication is consummate – you rarely feel that the game arbitrarily imposes the need to get hold of resources outside your character's skillset, but you must nevertheless visit the Auction House and socialise in order to excel at your jobs and gain the most profit from them.



WORLD BUILDER

ROB PARDO, WOW'S LEAD DESIGNER, EXPLAINS HOW BLIZZARD CREATED THE RPG THAT CONQUERED ALL

It took only 60 people to create the *World Of Warcraft* that opened to North American players on November 23, 2004. Two vast continents, steeped in lore and stuffed with 2,600 quests. Eight races and nine classes which could be sculpted into individuality through 60 levels of development. The 67 dungeons in which to test a deep combat system which delineated player roles and offered vast tactical variety. Auction houses which powered a lively economy based on the fruits of nine professions.

Not that many – if any – of these features were distinctly new. The first major 3D MMORPG, *EverQuest*, had since 1999 offered a similar raft of properties, which themselves had been inherited from a chain of online games from *Ultima Online* back to the early MUDs. And *EverQuest* was a hit among Blizzard's staff, including **Rob Pardo**, who'd become *WOW*'s lead designer.

But *World Of Warcraft* had a subtly new take on massively multiplayer online world building, one born of a developer whose CV included games from *The Lost Vikings* to *StarCraft*. It was a common touch, and also an exhaustively perfectionist one. But not a revolutionary one. *WOW* set out to be nothing other than definitive.



Three of the eight races available from launch: the Tauren, Orcs and Humans. Race defines characters' base stats and confers certain bonuses and abilities

"BUILDING WOW ON AN EXISTING FRANCHISE ALLOWED US TO CONCENTRATE ON DESIGN, RATHER THAN MAKING A WORLD FROM SCRATCH"

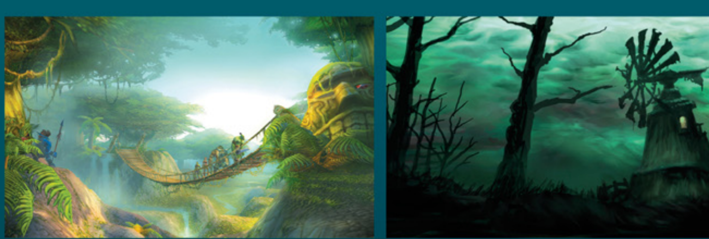
Not that the team that built *WOW* had ever made anything like it before. Its members were part of the team that shipped *StarCraft* in 1998. On completion, one half was assigned to *Warcraft III*, the other to working on an ill-fated console action RPG. It was then, according to Pardo, that the first talk of making a Blizzard MMOG began. Not that anyone intended to work on it soon. "We'd assumed that when we finished *Warcraft III* that team would go on to make it, but once the second team's game concept stuttered we had a dev team that was available," Pardo explains. "The MMOG idea was the thing that most people were excited about, so we had them work on it, and it fast-forwarded things."

The decision to base the project on the *Warcraft* universe was the result of little discussion. *Diablo* was developed by Blizzard North, a subsidiary based in San Mateo, so the team felt uncomfortable treading on the other studio's toes. *StarCraft* would have presented an entirely new paradigm to contemporary expectations of the setting of an MMOG. So it came down to *Warcraft*, Blizzard's already richly imagined fantasy world, or creating a new one.

"We could have done an original IP as compelling – I don't think it was so much the franchise that drove *WOW*'s original popularity," Pardo claims. "But by building *WOW* on an existing franchise it allowed us to concentrate on the design, rather than having to build a world from scratch."

It didn't only come down to the game's background and lore – the decision also meant that the project could reference and riff on some of its design. Look at *WOW* today and in some of its many forms it's not so hard to see a genesis in *Warcraft III*'s take on realtime strategy. "Both games started cross-informing each other during the dev process," Pardo remembers. "*Warcraft III* focused on heroes and hero gameplay, which helped *WOW* out a lot, because a lot of the concept of heroes and the spells translated into *WOW* classes." Look to the Dwarf Mountain King and his Storm Bolt and Bash abilities, both of which can be seen in *WOW*'s melee classes, and the Troll Witch Doctor, which had a totem mechanic that directly moved over to *WOW*'s Shaman class. "We pillaged many abilities to take into *WOW*."

And what did they take from existing MMOGs? Certainly, *EverQuest* features some



Concept art for Stranglethorn Vale, a thick tropical jungle that's home to raptors and trolls (left), and the permanently nighttime Tirisfal Glades, filled with the undead. Though these environments are now as old as the game, they're still strongly evocative



Rob Pardo is now executive vice president of game design at Blizzard. He'd previously led *Warcraft III* and *StarCraft*'s *Brood War* expansion





The size of the elements in *WOW*'s pre-release interface clearly didn't anticipate the vast amounts of information players would come to demand from the game. But its balance of clean yet ornate styling was set down very early and has become iconic, copied by many fantasy MMOGs

of the same class interdependencies – the classic triangle of tanks, damage dealers and healers. "But some of it was just a natural evolution, the way some roles defined themselves," Pardo says, pointing out that in design terms, crowd control – a mechanic by which some classes can control enemy movements – is much more important to *EverQuest*'s combat.

Not that it was Blizzard's intention for *WOW* to reinvent the MMORPG. Look at any genre to which the developer has applied itself, from the dungeon hack (*Diablo*) to the RTS (*StarCraft* and *Warcraft*), and you don't so much see pioneering games as simply the best of their genre.

Despite that, *WOW*'s essential philosophy was startlingly fresh. Those first explorers were struck by a world which gently led them through it, offering choice but also slowly exposing the intricate workings of its combat system and the richness of its world in a manner quite unlike the MMOGs that had gone before. "The genre at the time was really about virtual worlds with monsters and shopkeepers in them, and in which fun would just spontaneously ensue," Pardo says. "That was very powerful for a certain type of gamer, but most gamers out there want to know what they're supposed to do when they get dropped into a game."

WOW's comparative focus on questing over more free-ranging play, therefore, made it a lot more accessible than its

predecessors. "What we tried to do right from the beginning was to give you options – a menu of quests that you could take up to a maximum level and yet never run out of things to do," Pardo continues. "If you want to go off, ignoring the quests, to do your own thing, then that's fine, but we are going to give you options and make that the fastest way to gain experience in the game. A lot of people look at that as being obvious, but at the time no one had done it yet."

That level of choice went down as far as the degree to which *WOW* demanded that players group together to progress – there's always the choice not to. "With that social pressure in the game, you might play it for an hour, not find a group, and then feel it was a waste of your time. So that was something we wanted to avoid."

Many MMOG veterans looked on at *WOW*'s unfolding core design with some confusion – surely this was going against the base principles of the genre? Surely a massively multiplayer game should be built to encourage just that?

Indeed, *WOW*'s player-versus-player aspect was initially stunted. "We definitely wanted player combat, like with the Horde and the Alliance pitted against each other, but we weren't sure how far we wanted to go with the skill-based competitive arenas and so on." The game was launched without the Battleground scenarios, up to 40-a-side story-based multiplayer challenges which feature a mix of NPC and opposing players, or the Honor system, which rewards kills of enemy faction members. "We didn't think it was one of the core things that had to be there to define what *WOW* was," Pardo explains. With time running out before November 2004's launch, certain features had to be left out for the time being.

In its final months before launch, *WOW* publicly transformed from patch to patch in the closed beta. The combat system was entirely overhauled in April's 0.6, and character classes were continually tweaked and re-specced throughout.



Is there anything in *WOW* that Pardo regrets? "Tons! We still cringe at the Green Hills of Stranglethorn quest, though, where you have to fill something like 18 inventory slots with pages from a book." (Thanks to Alachia for the screenshot)





WOW is infused with elements from the series that preceded it, from abilities and combat mechanics to the background story, with the events of *Warcraft III* taking place before *WOW*. Visit the Caverns Of Time and you can play sequences from *Warcraft I* and *II*

It wasn't until version 0.8, released in July, that the auction house was implemented; in August's 0.9 patch the Zeppelin and boat travel system was added; item durability didn't come until 0.12 in October.

But within the team a greater controversy brewed. Though they wanted players to enjoy a sense of boiling conflict hardwired into the land, the decision to align races to either the Alliance or Horde and not allow members of opposing forces to play together was deemed a massive risk. "A lot of people want to just pick the race they want and play with that," explains Pardo. "Putting in this hard split where I'm an Orc and you're a Human and we're buddies yet we can't play together was a very controversial thing, especially when you consider that *EverQuest* didn't do that."

And yet Pardo and his team were confident in *WOW*. They felt that they could attract double the population of the most popular MMORPGs of the time, reaching a million subscribers within a year. In fact, on the first day of sale in north America, the game sold 240,000 copies. By March 2005, *WOW* had 1.5 million subscribers. Blizzard co-founder **Michael Morhaime** has recounted as part of the company's five-year anniversary celebrations that he drove to the studio's local Fry's electronics store before its midnight opening to gauge interest. "We were, you know, launching this massively multiplayer game," he said. "It was our first subscription game and the beta was pretty successful, but you really have no idea when you launch a game how many people are going to show up and want to buy it and play it." He found crowds of people there. An hour and a half before the opening, a queue went round the building twice, around its large parking lot and then down the street. "The feeling of driving up, walking up and seeing all these people excited to buy this game before it had even come out yet… was pretty special."

"IF YOU WANT TO GO OFF, IGNORING THE QUESTS, TO DO YOUR OWN THING, THEN THAT'S FINE, BUT WE ARE GOING TO GIVE YOU OPTIONS"

DUNGEON DOWNSIZING

If there's any one theme to the way Blizzard has refined *WOW*, it's in making it even more accessible. It's plain to see in the dungeons. "When we started we had five-man dungeons and 40-man raids, and now we don't have any 40-mans. We're down to 25-mans right down to ten-mans," Pardo explains. That has seen dungeon sizes reduced, too. "We've gone from monolithic dungeons like Blackrock Spire to smaller dungeons that can be completed in 15 to 30 minutes if you have a good group." Compare that to original *WOW* dungeons, which might take two or three hours to complete. The aim? "So the hardcore gamers of five years ago are catered for, and the more casual gamers that come in are catered for, too."

A low-flying crop duster started it all. You know, the one in *North By Northwest?*

As a young man, Patrick (or Pat to his only pal) went doolally for that scene. If he shut his eyes, he *was* Cary Grant, taking cover in that cornfield. It gave him butterflies.

It helped him understand – he was born to act.

Eventually, it would also become a metaphor for his career. Pat, the swooping barnstormer discharging gallons of raw, thespian pesticide. And ducking for cover? Horrified relatives, agents and producers alike.

Consider his first casting. Pat read somewhere that

"Acting is like standing up naked & turning around, very slowly."

Sadly, he took this literally. Pat would never audition in his hometown again.

"Auditions schmauditions" as he would say. Unbowed, he formed a dramatic society called The Galloping Swans. Their first project, *Yentl,* was to be staged for the local retirement home.

One evening, Pat turned up to rehearsals in his Y-fronts, three sheets to the wind. This upset the old folk, so management pulled the plug.

But the show must go on.

By chance, he landed a role in a toupee commercial for one of those shopping channels. Pat loved his costume, a ginger hairpiece, which gave him an "aura of untold elegance". Surely this would be his big break?

A gig at the Sunderland Empire followed. Admittedly, it was pushing a mop. But he doesn't tell people that, why should he? The run came to an end when Pat slipped on a half-eaten pasty during the triumphant finale of an imagined *King Lear,* fracturing his fibula.

After that? Pat turned his talents to Youtube. A two-hour performance of *Equus* had thirteen hits before it was taken down by request of animal welfare. He saw this as a runaway success, the highlight of his career.

Until now.

Pat wants to make the next Doritos TV ad & win £200k.

Please. Win it before he does.



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Steve Jackson meets Reiner Knizia

He's the most prolific game designer of all time, but you may not even know his name. Game industry pioneer Steve Jackson certainly does, however, so we asked him to profile the 'traditional' gaming world's busiest man as more of his creations prepare to make the leap toward videogame formats

He's had over 500 original games published since 1990, and sales of his games and books have exceeded 13m copies worldwide. But unless you're a fan, you won't have heard of any of them. Except perhaps the Hasbro edition of Lord Of The Rings, his most successful game to date, with sales of over 1.5m.

"A-ha!" you say. "Hasbro. We're not talking about videogames here, are we?" And you're quite right. **Reiner Knizia** has so far made his reputation in the last-gen world of board and card games. Specifically in the world of German boardgames.

I should explain. To the uninitiated, the term 'German board games' may prompt images of studious, bearded men hunched over wooden boards with abstract pieces playing dry, chess-like games. Pretty dull stuff.

But this could not be further from the truth.

There has long been a tradition within German culture of families getting together to play games on a regular basis – much more so than in the UK or the US. And, being Germans, they are more attracted towards games based on strategy, logic or mathematical skills. But here's where the breakthrough comes.

The typical 'German board game' isn't a variant of abstract games like draughts or Hnefatafl. Not at all. These games are simple to learn but difficult to master. The underlying mechanics are often strategy-based, but dressed up in attractive or wacky themes, like potato farming or moles racing through underground tunnels, or populating a zoo. Components are of the highest quality, with heavy-stock counters, chunky wooden playing pieces and beautifully illustrated boards. German games are aimed at families. But since they tend to avoid the roll-the-dice-and-move-around-the-board format, they have been adopted by game enthusiasts around the world.

These games are a joy to play, from the point of view of both design excellence and presentation quality. They have that winning formula, essential to good game design. The ideal game is one in which the winner believes he triumphed because he played more skilfully than the rest, but the losers felt they lost because the run of luck was against them. Everyone is happy, and wants to play again.

Knizia is the best-known designer of these games, and over the years he has received a string of honours from the German game industry. To date he has received 25 international awards, including two 'Spiel des Jahres' ('Game of the Year') prizes – the most prestigious board-gaming awards in the world. But now the great man is going digital, with games for PC, DS and iPhone already released, and more on their way.

Knizia recently accepted my invitation to talk to a class of Masters-level students at Brunel University, where I am an associate professor. These students are on an MA Digital Games: Theory & Design course, and it gave them

Steve Jackson (left) and Reiner Knizia go head to head at Brunel University



the opportunity to meet with the master of game design. Being something of a Knizia fanboy myself – I own probably 20 of his games – I sat down with him after the lecture session to discuss his career.

We've heard a lot about the tradition of German families regularly playing games together – do you come from a gaming family?
Not really. I just always loved and played a lot of games. I played everything I could get my hands on. When I didn't have enough pocket money, I starting making and designing my own games. I still have some designs that I made aged ten.

Do you remember any of the themes? Growing potatoes, perhaps?
No, no… One was a big board with castles, rivers and bridges. You rolled the dice and moved your armies forward…

A war game, then.
Yes. Then I got more ambitious with my designs and started contacting publishers. And finally got one accepted.

Which one was that?
It was about digging and a gold rush. [Goldrausch, published by Hans Im Gluck in 1990]



Knizia's lecture at Brunel University attracted a selection of special guests from the videogame industry, including Eidos life president Ian Livingstone (above right), ex-Sega Europe marketing chief Matt Woodley (near right) and Lionhead programmer Kalev Tait (centre right). All are keen fans of Knizia's work



Jackson action

Steve Jackson is a veteran of the game industry who began his career as a freelance journalist, writing for Games & Puzzles magazine before moving on to a weekly games page in the Daily Telegraph. He co-created the Fighting Fantasy series of adventure gamebooks, which have sold 15 million copies around the world, and co-founded both Games Workshop (with Ian Livingstone) and Lionhead Studios (with Peter Molyneux). He designed the world's first telephone adventure game, Fantasy Interactive Scenarios by Telephone (F.I.S.T.), and the first collectible card game (Steve Jackson's Battlecards). In 1993 he won European Games Player of the Year at the Intergame tournament in Essen, Germany. He is now a professor of game design at Brunel University in West London where he teaches on the MA Digital Games: Theory & Design course.

Around that time you were also involved in play-by-mail games, weren't you? Presumably as a hobby…
I actually published a play-by-mail magazine, which came out every two weeks. It covered all my own creations. Any number of players could play, and at one point I had several hundred players.

As far as your career as a designer goes, what would you say was your big break?
I think the first big step was winning the Deutscher Spiele Preis [an award similar to Spiel des Jahres] in 1993, with Modern Art. That gave me good visibility. So over the next six or seven years I was relatively focused on designing games. Before I went full time on game design I was a board member of a big bank getting £2bn of new business every year. But I left that job 15 years ago. It was a very well thought through decision over some years, and it was the right thing to do.

So, what sort of setup do you run now? Does it exist as a company, with its own staff?
I have my assistant, Karen, who works for me full-time, taking care of the operational business, so I can concentrate on what I do best – creating games. I have somebody working for me on the creative side and someone dealing with office maintenance. We have a big storage area and an archive of games, so somebody has to look after that. There's a hardcore team of 12 people, who all do their bit and work hard to achieve our goals. Playtesting is the main thing for most of the group. We discuss a lot and hold creative workshops. We try to push forward a lot of different designs for all sorts of media. We've recently moved into digital games on the Nintendo DS and these are tested by a relatively small team. I'm a scientist and I try to base my games on relatively few principles. Therefore, the implementation of these games is not so complicated.



For me, Lost Cities is a classic Reiner Knizia design. That must have a special place in your heart.
It's certainly one of the favourites of a lot of players, and it's found itself in a lot of very different media. There's the board game, the card game, but now also Xbox Live Arcade and online. It found its successor in Keltis, which is derived from Lost Cities. Keltis was the Game of the Year last year in Germany. We have marketed it as a PC CD-ROM game, as well as a DS game, and soon it will also be available for the iPhone.

What do you do about the computer player's playing strategy in the solo game? Is it difficult to implement the AI for such a game?
I gave the programmers hints as to the crucial rules for the AI and what you have to look after. It's done by the studio and it is achievable. I believe that if it's an electronic game, though, you don't just want to play against the AI. I include what's called a solitaire mode against the mechanics as such. Keltis has an extensive solitaire mode over many levels in which you play as a single player, trying to collect useful things which can be used later in the game. This was specifically developed for electronic implementations. That way you can play against the challenges I throw at you through the game design.

Which other games would you say are special to you?
One which is highly ranked is Tigris And Euphrates. It's a complex game but it's been out for many years and is still highly regarded and played a lot. If I look at it now I'm absolutely convinced of that design – I wouldn't do it any other way, even with all the experience I've gained since. Everything fell into place and I'm very proud of it. I like exploring new things, like a series of hybrid games which I did with Ravensburger [including the oddly named Wer War's?]. These were essentially a social game and a board game with an electronic unit in the middle. They fascinated me a lot. With these, which were unfortunately not released in English, we won the German Children's Game of the Year. So I think that by going in new directions you refresh what you've already established.

"OUR DS GAMES ARE TESTED BY A RELATIVELY SMALL TEAM. I'M A SCIENTIST AND I TRY TO BASE MY GAMES ON RELATIVELY FEW PRINCIPLES"





A number of Knizia's games have been given videogame translations to date, including *Keltis* (top) and *Lost Cities* (above). Further games are in the works for formats such as Wii, DS and iPhone/iPod Touch

The one to win

Undoubtedly one of the reasons for the success and popularity of German games was the creation in 1978 of the 'Spiel des Jahres' (Game of the Year) prize. This is an annual award voted each year by a panel of journalists and gameplayers from the German-speaking regions.

The appearance of the Spiel des Jahres logo on a game more or less guarantees excellence. If typical sales of a German game are 500 to 3,000 copies, the announcement of a Spiel des Jahres nomination alone can increase sales to around 10,000. But the annual winner can expect to sell 300,000 to 500,000 copies. Clearly, then, this is a very important gong.



Games are judged on:

1. Game concept (originality, playability, game value)
2. Rule structure (composition, clearness, comprehensibility)
3. Layout (box, board, rules),
4. Design (functionality, workmanship)

The first winner of the Spiel des Jahres award was Hase und Igel, a game originally published in the UK as Hare & Tortoise. This ingenious race game was a British creation, invented by playing-card expert David Parlett. In 1984 the Speil des Jahres was Dampfross, a railway-building game designed by Welshman David Watts. Known in the UK as Railway Rivals, it was published by Watts himself, and at first sales came mainly from a loyal UK fanbase. Winning the Spiel des Jahres resulted in sales of 350,000 copies in Germany, dwarfing the numbers in the UK.

Knizia has won the Spiel des Jahres award twice, with Keltris and Wer War's?, and the Children's Spiel des Jahres with an electronic game series. Wolfgang Kramer, another German designer well known for more hardcore strategic games like El Grande, has won the award five times – more than any other game designer.

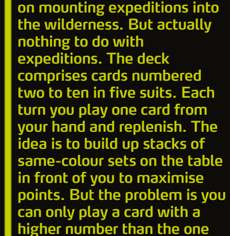
What's the typical lifespan of a board game these days?
It's very short, a few years, even months, what with all the novelty that's constantly being released. Of course, that's not what we're looking for. We're after a much longer lifespan where we can reach a critical mass with a game and establish it. Simple games – puzzle games or abstract games – have a better chance in my eyes. It's a three- to five-minute experience, and a lot more people will stick with it, and get kind of addicted to it, which in the nice sense would be very good. Look at *Bejeweled* – for me this is the archetype of an abstract game. It doesn't involve taking on a new role, although it retains a flavour of its setting. You can make it monumental or you can have diamonds in a treasure area. You want to have an exciting presentation even if it's an abstract game.

Over the years the rise of digital games has almost killed the market for enthusiasts' board games. There is still the gift market – the inevitable licences and tie-ins – but we see very few board games published simply on the merits of their design quality. The German board games hobby has been keeping the craft alive, to a degree, but is the same thing happening – perhaps a little more slowly – in Germany, too? Are videogames gradually taking over everywhere?
Germany is still very much a paradise in this respect. Board-gaming traditions are carried forward within families and there are lots of games in the households. So it is a very rich market for publishers. And there is lots of competition, offering customers a lot of choice. They are actually also getting more popular in America, and I orient myself internationally, so I look at what other countries are into.

What would you say are the key elements of these games? What are the important factors to get right?
Designing and creating games isn't a science, so there's no checklist, no 20 steps you have to follow and then you end up with a good game. To stand out from the crowd one has to see the creative process as an artistic activity. For me it has become very important to avoid following a fixed methodology because it leads you down the same path. I'm always looking for new entry points, because that gives me the best chance of creating something novel. That's what I strive for and that's my philosophy. We have so many great opportunities because the markets are moving so quickly these days, so it's important not to restrict yourself to any one genre. The games reflect our times and our lives, so staying abreast of this and moving with it is exciting. I want to reach a lot of people with my games, and so I'm more orienting myself towards the casual market, and that means simplicity – but not simple. The excitement of the game is brought down to the core of the game, offering people a satisfying experience that doesn't last too long, consisting of play against other players or the game mechanics itself.

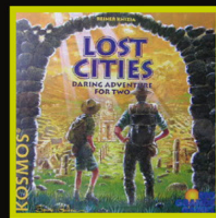






Three of the best

Steve Jackson picks a trio of his favourite Knizia games



Lost Cities

A simple but ingenious twoplayer card game themed on mounting expeditions into the wilderness. But actually nothing to do with expeditions. The deck comprises cards numbered two to ten in five suits. Each turn you play one card from your hand and replenish. The idea is to build up stacks of same-colour sets on the table in front of you to maximise points. But the problem is you can only play a card with a higher number than the one already on top. So if there's a five on top of your red stack and you have a red nine in your hand, do you play it now, or wait to see whether you pick up a red six, seven or eight? The balance of this game is perfect: there are always two or three considerations to take into account as the range of play options dwindles – to the point where you are forced to play a card which benefits your opponent. And the way scores are calculated is inspired: you are penalised for expeditions which don't score a minimum number of points. Lost Cities can also be turned into an excellent impromptu gambling game. Keltis, the multiplayer version of Lost Cities, won Spiel des Jahres in 2008.



Which other game designers do you particularly admire?
I have many friends who are designers, but none I would point out above others. I think we all accept that on the board gaming side Alex Randolph did a lot of good things and really shaped the image of board games with titles like TwixT, Inkognito and Enchanted Forest. Sid Saxon was probably equivalent in America. I consider these men the two grandfathers of our gaming culture. Unfortunately, both of them passed away recently.

And what have you got coming up for us in the future?
I leave the marketing of a game up to a publisher, and of course the announcement of a new game is part of the marketing, so I'm very careful that I don't interfere with the plans of the publishers! There are some straightforward things that you can expect, though. We had a lot of success with Keltis, so we will have a successor game to it, which will come out in 2010 – and, as it's a PC CD-ROM and DS game, no doubt we will eventually see it on iPhone. We'll also have our second Wii game coming out in the second quarter of 2010 – it's more a party-style game and I think we've chosen a very spicy theme for it. And we have a lot of upcoming iPhone designs which haven't found a publishing partner yet, but it's only a matter of time.



Ingenious

Unusually for Knizia, this is an abstract game, but with an ingenious scoring system. This is all about making chains of colours on a hexagonal board. Sounds dull, but when you realise how the scoring works, the game takes on a different aspect entirely. It's not about strengths, it's about protecting your weaknesses. The original game was for two to four players, but a twoplayer travel version and an online iteration are also available.

"DESIGNING AND CREATING GAMES ISN'T A SCIENCE. THERE'S NO CHECKLIST, NO 20 STEPS TO FOLLOW TO END UP WITH A GOOD GAME"

Some developers in the videogame industry look forward to a time when they can cut out the middle men and sell their games directly to the public. Have you ever been tempted to publish your own games? Having established such a following among boardgame players, surely this would be a successful venture? Game publishers have a reputation for being tough negotiators as far as royalties are concerned, particularly in the board games industry.
No. Because I understand that publishing requires different qualities to the creating of games. Sales, marketing, production – getting everything under one umbrella – it's not something I'm as good at, so I'm not going to fall into the trap of thinking: 'So, I can design games – maybe I can do all the rest well, too'. That's setting yourself up for failure. If I stick with what I do best and focus on that, it's where I think I can make the biggest contribution. Relying on professionals to do their part of the job is for me a part of the concept of success. I'm very enthusiastic about the designing and creating of the games themselves. I don't want to manage a games company like I managed in my banking days. I have all the freedom to create the good things – that's what I do best and that's what I want to stick with.



Modern Art

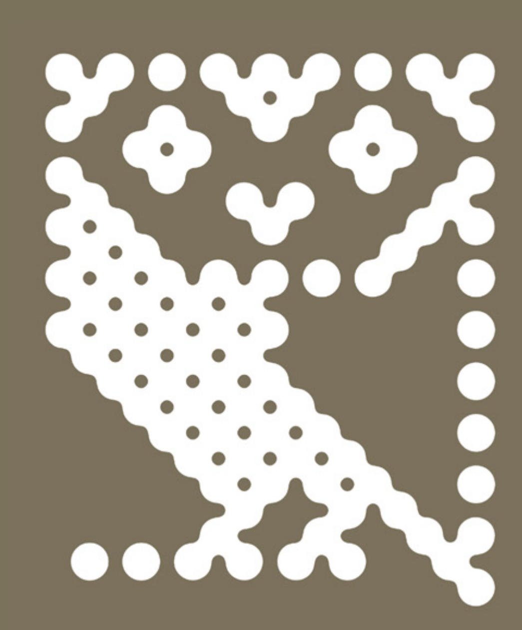
Winner of the Deutscher Spiele Preis in 1993, this three- to fiveplayer game is classic Knizia. It is a collection of auction variations, packaged in a modern art theme. Works by five fictional artists come up for auction, the auction method being chosen by the seller. The more you bid, the more money you are giving to an opponent. And salesmanship works, as some artists become valuable and others worthless. The winner is the player with the most money after four rounds.



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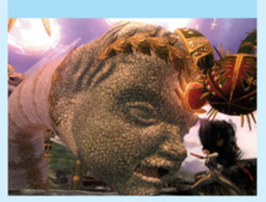
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Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

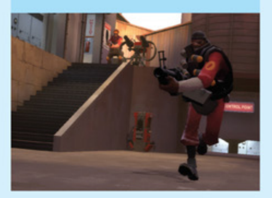
Edge's most played

Bayonetta



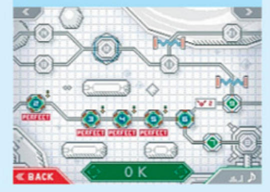
After more than 100 hours, it still feels fresh. We went back to *God Hand* and *DMC3* this month and while both are still brilliant, they feel a little slow in comparison.
360, PS3, PLATINUM GAMES

Team Fortress 2



When Valve's in a good mood, this sells for as low as $1 on Steam, so you'd be a fool not to get in there, but beware **Edge**'s Demoman: he'll blaw yer ass up.
PC, VALVE

Starship Patrol



Not most played in terms of hours, but each time we've had five spare minutes, the old DSi has sprung forth. Latest trick: black holes, tractor beams, crossed fingers.
DSI, Q-GAMES

Abandon all hope

Why Dante's Inferno deserves more of a hearing



By the way, we didn't get a cheque in the post to put our avarice to the test – wise old EA obviously knows we wouldn't publish stories detailing our inner turmoils

A classic is whatever you say. Case in point: The Divine Comedy. It wasn't called that at all until Giovanni Bocaccio decided that Dante's plain old Commedia deserved the added Divina. It wouldn't be published under that name until over 200 years after the poet's death. And who was this saint Dante? It was a mere two years ago that Florence, the city of his birth, got around to rescinding an order he be burned at the stake if he ever returned. That must have been a relief.

You sense Dante would have had nothing but scorn for the current spectacle of hand-wringing critics having a whinge about the reinterpretation of his work by Visceral Games. The Inferno is a section of a poem, let's not forget, which isn't especially pleasant.

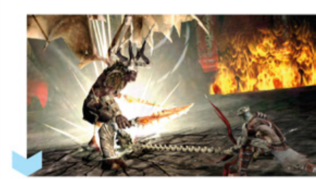
When you get to the likes of William Blake's interpretations, it's pretty grim stuff. Nobody would criticise him, naturally, because he's an artist, and he's entitled to interpret. Mickey's Inferno, a Disney retelling with its own characters? The bits in Dungeons & Dragons' own Nine Hells that are directly ripped from Dante's version? Professor Fate's 2007 album The Inferno? Entitled, entitled, entitled. Regardless of what anyone thinks of them, no one believes such references shouldn't exist. History shows that the poem will survive and grow through whatever is done to it.

Except, it seems, in the anxious critical atmosphere around videogames, where even approaching a 'classic' is subject to so much speculation that it's a wonder Visceral is able to hold its tongue. Rather than engage with the game and figure out what it's doing, many have dismissed it based on assumptions about what it'll be. *Dante's Inferno* isn't a great game, but that's beside the point: before playing it, many have decided that a combat-focused videogame isn't capable of doing anything with this source material. (Looking back, we were too cynical in our post-E3 report last year.)

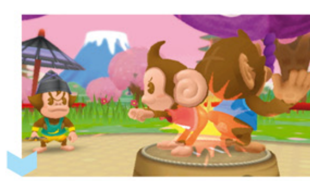
The quality or otherwise of its interpretation should be held distinct from the fact that it is an interpretation, and its right to exist is sacrosanct to anyone who claims to evangelise the medium. You can think anything you wish about *Dante's Inferno* as a videogame – but at the same time you have to be prepared to defend its right to exist.











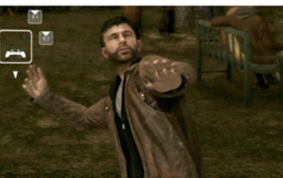
Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



HEAVY RAIN

FORMAT: PS3 **RELEASE:** FEBRUARY 26
PUBLISHER: SCEE **DEVELOPER:** QUANTIC DREAM
PREVIOUSLY IN: E193, E204, E207, E211





They may not be physical simulations, but sequencing button-holds to perform tricky manoeuvres does evoke a sense of concentration. Launching a boomerang is fun, but it all works better when bleeding, drowning or burning is on the cards

"Thank you for supporting Interactive Drama." David Cage may not repeat his digitised *Fahrenheit* appearance, but his voice rings clear in the first Trophy *Heavy Rain* awards. Odd it should arrive at the outset, where our 'support' amounts to one glass of orange juice glugged and two children entertained. Perhaps Cage means to reassure us. After months of struggling to describe and defend individual moments, Quantic Dream has found a confidence in the whole. But where great movies are unified in the editing suite, *Heavy Rain*'s strength lies in those earlier inconsistencies.

Scene to scene, few games match *Heavy Rain*'s compulsive pull. A boy is abducted; his father must pass fiendishly engineered trials to save him. Being propelled through these challenges taps into the same gruesome curiosity that has powered six Saw films to date. What will be asked of him next? Will he ever catch up with his tormentor? Is he really going to do that with those pliers? As a safety net to the father's plight, three other characters ensure that varied ground is covered. A private dick charts the fallout from a serial killer. A preppy journalist sneaks into the homes of kooks and crazies. The FBI agent cleans up all of their mess.

Where is often as important as what. While Quantic Dream initially presents



***Heavy Rain*'s fights and chases verge on parody. A pursuit through a covered market – incorporating chairs, fruit and even chickens – is only missing a pair of workmen carrying an enormous pane of glass**



perfect Ikea-filled domiciles – Madison seems to have moved into Lucas Kane's *Fahrenheit* apartment (vacant since he turned into a god) – they make way for a refreshingly downbeat palette of city suburbs and motels. It is here, not in the heavy-handed sprinklings of suicide, abuse and child murder, that director Cage finds his maturity. A fine line is trodden between realism – aptly conjured with the finest quality of light seen this generation – and filmic cliché, onscreen figure into brushing his teeth is far from simulation. And why, on a control pad with perfectly squishy triggers, are gunshots meted out with a prod of a stunted shoulder button? When inputs don't bemuse, they often befuddle. Hovering over the environment, the cues make clear what can be interacted with, but not necessarily how. At different times straight directional pushes will pick up, open, eat, drink and smash. In a game founded primarily on



> Being propelled through these challenges taps into the same gruesome curiosity that has powered six Saw films. What will be asked of him next?

only occasionally, and thus effectively, giving in to the fantasy that plagued so much of *Fahrenheit*. Needless to say, the Origami Killer is one creepy interior decorator.

As a thriller, *Heavy Rain* thrives on jarring uncertainty. Context-sensitive controls tap into similarly playful unknowns. "What happens next?" asks the story. "Whatever we want," reply the buttons. Bar one trigger, the controls are free to be what they want. They can toss a boomerang, rock a baby or stove in heads with a wide selection of electrical appliances. *Heavy Rain* is a point-and-click adventure with a massive verb sheet; new actions are as much a twist as the narrative reveals they prompt. Although occasionally misjudged – transitioning from sponging slit wrists to nappy changing is a little much – the hunger for fresh interactions is constantly fed throughout.

The controls don't always make sense. Vigorously flailing the Sixaxis to bully an

choosing a path, the inability to know exactly what you're doing is literally and figuratively short-sighted.

A similar criticism can be levelled at the scene structure. Quantic Dream smartly guides you with director's tricks. Camera angles, focusing and splitscreen subtly hint at key props and draw the eye towards points of interest. No doubt about it, you'll know what to do. The question is why you do it. Segments can begin with little explanation of why you're there or, in the opening scenes, who you are. Early hours are spent investigating a crime you haven't even been told about. The Stanislavski school of acting would ask: what's our motivation? Even internal monologue (summoned with a shoulder button) fails to fill in the gaps. Why the resistance to recap?

The confusion stems from *Heavy Rain*'s adaptable storytelling, an ambitious system that sets itself the impossible task of bringing









Cage repeats many of ***Fahrenheit*'s dramatic beats, from a more overarching fugitive plotline to individual scenarios: panicked evidence hiding, escaping the police, and coping with an anxiety attack (above). No old ladies turn into the internet, however**

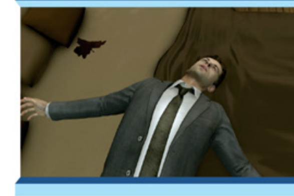
Splitscreen acts as a naturalistic countdown during the time-sensitive scenes. Struggling to escape a maniac as he potters around elsewhere in his house is tense stuff

together Cage's jumble of scenarios. Our heroes can't regurgitate the plot because they don't dare try. *Heavy Rain* pulls off its branching narrative by donning blinkers and sprinting down the chosen routes. Countless permutations of each scene are allowed, safe in the knowledge that they will never be addressed again. Scars, bandages and bloodied stumps accrue, but in a game full of moral choices, we are owed more than a character reskin. How do you invest in decisions if they are so casually frittered away?

Death is a sticking point. Die in the story and the world moves on (see 'Grave situation'). It's an intriguingly tangible threat, and as such motivates your success in Quick Time Events – there are no game overs or restarts. Whether driving into oncoming traffic or fighting knife-wielding intruders, the chain of onscreen stick prods and controller tilts is feverishly adhered to. But it appears that the Grim Reaper is in a lenient mood. Deliberately tempt fate, refuse to follow the cues, and the QTEs often play out to non-fatal conclusions. The general skeleton of the story cannot truly be changed, cheapening every event in the process. Whether or not the Origami Killer is apprehended, his fiendishness is neutered from the outset – Cage is unwilling to force the consequences of failure on to the player.

"How far are you willing to go to save someone you love?" asks the kidnapper. We'd put a similar question to Cage: how far are you willing to go for interactive drama? Scene by scene, *Heavy Rain* proves itself a worthy advocate, ripe with potential and mystery. But the bigger it grows and the more it threatens to collide and conflict, the broader the strokes become. Are you a champion of freedom and interaction or choreographed thrills? Do you make games or films? Like the scenarios put before our desperate father, the decisions are not easy, and the consequences often unsatisfying. But watching them unfold? Quite unlike anything else. **[7]**

Grave situation

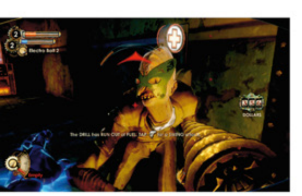


Die, and the story adapts. It helps that, bar two characters, the four leads rarely meet and interact throughout the tale. As a result, individual branches can be snapped from the whole without any major repercussions. Yes, some fun scenes are denied as punishment – we get the sense that the four-character conclusion is the 'true' ending – but the real pain is seeing well-rounded characters abandoned by the roadside. The true punishment for failing them is watching how suddenly their lives are curtailed. The deaths are often undignified, at the hands of cartoon villains. Worse, Cage's game-ending 'obituaries' are easily the weakest scenes, curt summations that simply don't gel with an otherwise meandering attention to detail.

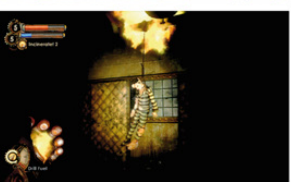


BIOSHOCK 2

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS3 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: 2K GAMES **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE/DIGITAL EXTREMES
PREVIOUSLY IN: E202, E204







The Splicers in this sequel are more grotesque than before, their bodies irredeemably warped through Adam, but 2K Marin still squeezes pathos from the odd individual encounter. In groups they're little more than animals, so it's all the more satisfying to see them fall before your rainbow-hued deathtraps

From the moment of conception, *BioShock 2* had its work cut out, the popular line suggesting it was a sequel to a game that didn't need one. It follows a work that exposed FPS convention before being brought down by it, a cast and narrative singlehandedly responsible for the biggest rush on Ayn Rand's Wikipedia page in history, and a world that left those who played it with a tangible sense of place. So, among many achievements, *BioShock 2*'s big one is this: it is its own game.

But this is still Rapture, of course. Familiar posters and adverts decorate the walls, plasmids and weapons are revisited, the overall aesthetic is an evolution of tone rather than a change in substance, and there are even tribute sequences that a cynic might call retreads. It is, however, free of the anxiety of influence. Realising that a straight-faced attempt to recapture the original's magic was a potential disaster, this is instead an exaggeration of the science-fiction and a move towards horror. Ten years on from the fall of Andrew Ryan, Rapture is a rancid hole, its inhabitants scrofulous and spliced beyond hope in their efforts to survive, its society no longer worthy of the label. Forget the fallen utopia – this is full-on dystopia, everything remaining struggling to stay alive.



Controlling the Big Daddy prototype 'Delta' brings a neat take to the vexed question of morality. You still make decisions, but their impact is felt on something other than you, and in a subtler manner than the Hitler/Jesus dichotomy of *BioShock*



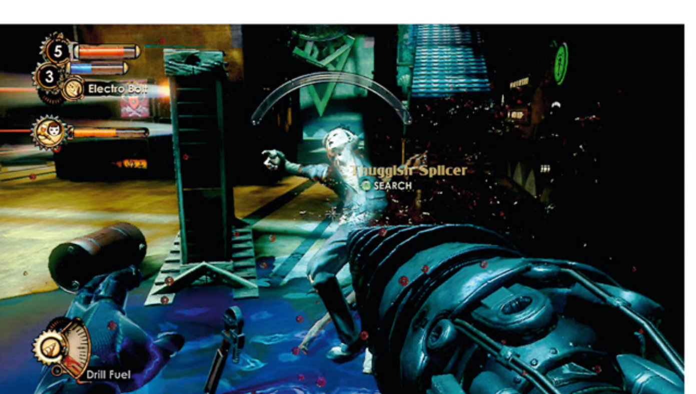
> Fail to thin out Splicer numbers and you'll fall under a hail of bullets and pipes, bludgeoned by heavies and peppered from a distance

You're no exception. Lumped rather inelegantly into a new role by a lengthy cutscene, you're prodded back and forth on little errands to get a feel for things before your first glimpse of Rapture proper – a vista of unusual beauty. From these encrusted beginnings the true nature of *BioShock 2* emerges: a violent scavenger hunt. You check every corpse, search every container, and look carefully in every dark corner for ammo, cash, food and chunks of story in the form of audio diaries or hurried scrawls. And, every so often, you get into a massive fight.

Combat is the beating heart of *BioShock 2*, and it improves on the original's template while holding on to a few of the bad bits. Splicers still aren't that much fun to shoot: they're now capable of taking cover, though often leave themselves exposed, and retain that predictable movement and rubbery ragdoll quality that makes isolated faceoffs irritating rather than exhilarating. You get an amazing-looking machine-gun that, for all the impact it has, feels like it must be firing dried rice. On the other hand, Spider Splicers are vastly improved by a new melee attack, and larger enemies come into play that are similarly unafraid of bringing the battle right up to your face. It's in the mix that it all begins to work.

BioShock 2's structure isn't particularly interesting, but its one big idea – and it's a good one – is to allow time to prepare for a fight and then throw everything it can in your general direction. Since you're a Big Daddy, when you bag a Little Sister you can set her down to gather Adam from particular corpses, attracting the attention of groups of enemies. Splicers might be irritating gnats on their own, but a swarm of them surrounding the more troubling enemies is a different proposition – fail to thin out their numbers and you'll fall quickly under a hail of bullets and pipes, bludgeoned by heavies and peppered from a distance by the thrown ice hooks of Spider Splicers.

So you learn to make the environment







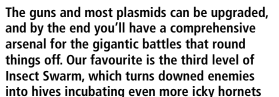
The drill's a brilliant melee weapon once you've unlocked the dash move, the lack of detailed flesh-ripping cunningly obscured by an explosion of blood when you make contact. The fuel on which it greedily feeds tends to run out rather too quickly, though. As for multiplayer content, we'll be posting our impressions at edge-online.com



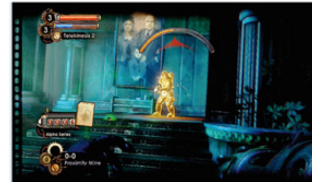







The guns and most plasmids can be upgraded, and by the end you'll have a comprehensive arsenal for the gigantic battles that round things off. Our favourite is the third level of Insect Swarm, which turns downed enemies into hives incubating even more icky hornets



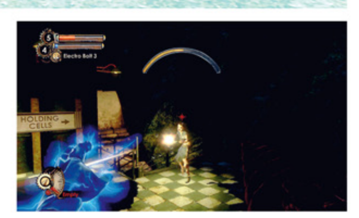

Researching's handled in a more engaging manner this time around: you set the camera rolling and then throw everything at the highlighted enemy. A numerical score tots up at the side, which is boosted by varying your tactics, and spits out regular prizes and hints

work to your advantage. You cram narrow corridors leading to the battlefield with trap rivets, and fill wider spaces with cyclone traps. The ground is mined in preparation for deploying a decoy. Oil spills and pools of water are noted, and plasmids prepared. Then you set the girl down to do her thing.

You hear enemies coming, and one of the greatest touches of this central mechanic is that you just don't know whether it will be a minor assault or a gigantic one. Sometimes it seems there are only a few Splicers nearby, and they don't get near you – never mind the Little Sister. Other times it's like you've stumbled into a convention for genetic freaks after they've been at the free bar for hours, such is the sustained ferocity pouring from every angle. It tempts experimentation with the weapon set in a way the original allowed, but never forced, and though there are sure-fire combinations, almost everything seems to have a purpose – even the bees.

There are also faceoffs against the Big Daddies and Big Sister to add to the mix. The former feel a little helpless after you've acquired certain weapons: a few proximity mines at once, added to some rocket spears and electricity, and they just don't have an answer. To be fair, our plans went awry more than once thanks to clumsy aiming, but in the vast majority of these fights we didn't even suffer a graze. Big Sister's a different matter, thanks mainly to her combination of disorienting, fast movement and efficiency at range and up close. Though you get a warning before her arrival, she seems cannier about dodging the more obvious pitfalls, and you're never sure where she's going to come from. If you're not totally overwhelmed within the first few seconds, or you get lucky with trap placement, these become memorable cat-and-mouse fights, where the roles switch seamlessly as you hit and miss.

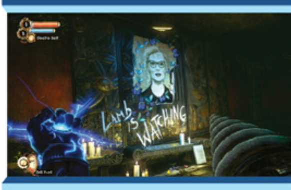
And Rapture itself? Water damaged, leaking from almost every seam, the walls are covered with glowing barnacles and the fixtures are in ruin, floors missing and entire sections flooded. It's not as grand a discovery as the first time around, but it's full of hidden surprises and deliciously arch touches, like the museum designed for children born in Rapture to learn about the surface world (all exhibits narrated by Andrew Ryan), and the broken Splicer hanging in his room, the shelves a mess of vodka bottles and cigarettes. The unambitious architecture is therefore a disappointment. These new locations are corridor-and-room based, and rarely spiral into the awe-inspiring spaces that the outward glimpses tease. Even when you get outside of Rapture, the ocean is a corridor of its own, your wanderings unceremoniously halted by knee-high ferns and convenient debris. For all that the game takes from *Dead Space* – and it takes a lot –



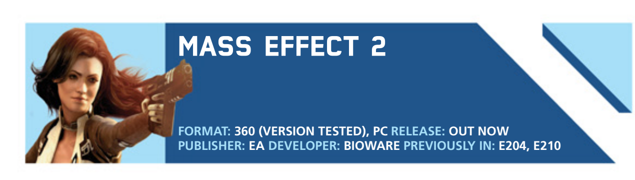
you wish more attention had been paid to the atmosphere Visceral so successfully created in zero-G environments.

And at the end of your return visit, what's left? The conviction that it was worth it; that Rapture still has more imaginative pull than just about any other gameworld, and more capacity for sad, beautiful and horrible stories in its pressure-cooker than the first game hinted at. Most of all, *BioShock 2* has one quality that makes us much more hopeful for the future of the series and its inevitable onward growth as one of gaming's big franchises: it shows the capacity of Rapture to utterly change itself for the telling of a new tale, while somehow remaining the same. **[8]**

I reject those answers



There's nothing in *BioShock 2*'s narrative that even attempts to compete with the great plot twist of the original. Indeed, it's a much more straightforward tale with a rather daft conclusion that wears its learning a lot more obviously (really, audio diaries of debates?). The philosophies of Andrew Ryan and Dr Sofia Lamb are the background noise, but it's difficult to see where either really hooks into the current situation of Rapture – and how Lamb is able to command an army of self-interested human-mutants with her rather specious arguments. It doesn't really wash. More grievously, Lamb's not a patch on Ryan, coming across more like an irritating librarian. On the plus side, the voice acting and scripting in general maintain a very high standard, the environment holds its own tales for the dedicated browser, and the side-stories are in some cases exceptional (we won't ruin it beyond saying that one ends when you kill a Big Daddy, and it's brilliantly done).



MASS EFFECT 2

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: BIOWARE PREVIOUSLY IN: E204, E210





Much of the game is spent gathering operatives, and this sees BioWare playing a familiar hand: travel, make friends, get a few of them killed

The Collectors would have been out of place in the original *Mass Effect*. A polite space opera that, perhaps due to BioWare's social-studies approach to world-building, never got its hands dirty, Commander Shepard's first adventure explored a cosmos imagined with all the drama of airport terminal design. Traversing that controlled environment in a long-necked ship with an interior built from ovals, you dealt out justice which, even if you chose to go rogue, would merely wobble between frat-house nihilism and thin-lipped petulance.

So, no, the Collectors don't fit that mould. Insectoid, chittering and repellent, they turn human colonists into zombified husks as they pursue their mysterious goals. Alongside providing a welcome jolt of chaos, they're the gruesome core of an intriguing story that is wrapped, inevitably, in a far more familiar one. On a structural level, the SSV Normandy's latest mission is a yarn BioWare's spun for years: recruit a team, earn their trust, and stick it to an ancient evil by swinging through dialogue trees and fighting past carefully staged gauntlets. Overarching similarities aside, however, *Mass Effect 2* is a product of glorious meddling; recalibration has turned what was once worthy into something vivid, dramatic and characterful.



> The Normandy's latest mission is a yarn BioWare's spun for years: recruit a team, earn their trust, stick it to an ancient evil



The original game's score has been damaged somewhat in the transition to the sequel. As the plot gets thicker, the bleeps and blats of Vangelis increasingly make way for the empty grandeur of John Williams





Going renegade retains moments of childish fun. *Mass Effect* allowed you to punch news reporters and crack jokes while a security chief wrote letters to the families of the men you'd just killed. Here, in one memorable moment, you get to send a tubby nobody into a vicious gun battle to draw enemy fire



Refinements are, initially, most visible in combat: cover is easier to navigate, there's been a thorough rethink of cooldowns, and the range of ammo prods even the sleepiest players towards experimentation. Targeting has been sharpened so that when you pull out your gun, the game genuinely feels like a shooter rather than an RPG dressing up.

Some of the new weapons would stand out on any future battlefield: the Collectors' particle beam produces a crisp sizzle as it burns through distant shields, while chewing into stragglers with the SMG is a guilty treat. The new biotics have more bite, Shockwave sending a thudding trail of explosions along the ground, while Charge steals the show as a kind of super-powered Jedi headbutt.

If the game indulges its fighting spirit a little more regularly, plenty of other elements have also benefited from careful revision. The galaxy map is now navigated via a dinky spaceship, and while exploration never approaches the highs of the combat, a little tooling around the Milky Way reveals that there are actually plenty of things worth doing this time. Scanning has become a simple yet compulsive minigame as you feel your way over the bumpy surface of planets, dowsing for anomalies, while searching for the minerals required for upgrades turns every star-crossing into a dawdling shopping trip. It also serves to remind you that, despite the flair the game now shows for action, it can still give you the things you want from an RPG if you want to turn off the auto-levelling and get stuck into tweaking.

Going planetside no longer requires the wonky vehicle-wrangling of the original, and when you meet the locals the protracted conversations are framed with more style, studded with both punchy interrupts and – even better – the voice of President Bartlett in a key role. Characterisation is where the sequel has made some of its greatest leaps, the decks of the Normandy quickly filling with complex personalities instead of philosophical arguments in jumpsuits. The ever-expansive dialogue trees are riddled







Elevators may be out, but the load times have, if anything, increased. You'll spend more time than you may have planned staring at the Normandy in wireframe while you slog your way to the next planet







Opening with a bang, *Mass Effect 2* often requires you to set the pace for it, using side-quests to even out a narrative that grinds its gears between an awkwardly familiar first two acts and a final sequence that's top-heavy with chaos

with both humour and insight, so it's always worth talking to others, even if you're not prepared to delve into the existential horror of a BioWare romance sequence.

Such comprehensive refinements might be enough to suggest that *Mass Effect 2* has brought nothing beyond polish. Yet, while the campaign plods a straightforward path down the centre of the universe, the game is transformed by the fun to be had off-road. It may be pitched as a race against time, but in reality you'll want to amble through this adventure, investigating every avenue.

Shepard's first outing was, more than anything, let down by inane side-quests which couldn't hide the thin central plot. Here, extra-curricular elements are a great enhancement, good enough to turn a decent game into an excellent one, as the richer cast combines with sly storytelling to provide the kind of meaty intricacies that were previously banished to the codex menu. Even when the stopping-and-popping threatens to blur each planet into colour-coded arrangements of cover, punchier scenarios help mix things up, spinning you off to a world in which the sun eats at your armour, boosting you onboard a penitentiary where cells are slotted in and out by gigantic robotic hands, or throwing you into a midnight assault on a skyscraper that wouldn't disappoint Hans Gruber.

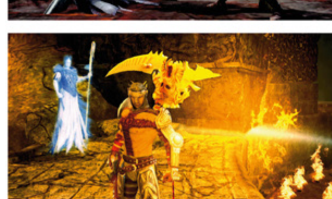
Ultimately, *Mass Effect 2*'s greatest strength is in tying together its disparate pieces, binding the gunplay and conversation systems into something that meshes, while creating an action-RPG that knows stats should be there, but that they should never get in the way of a good headshot. The result is a game that's grown into its obvious potential. With the first instalment, BioWare built a universe of words – a deeply convincing multicultural sprawl you could read about without ever quite getting to touch. Here, you're inside it from the start – and the view is often dazzling. **[9]**

Closed quarters



An unspeakable lust for side content has seen BioWare turn the captain's cabin of the Normandy into the farthest outpost of the *Animal Crossing* universe, as you fill it up with tat (including pets and model ships), endlessly tweak your in-game wardrobe, or just relax to the bombastic pomp of the soundtrack selector. While it's always a pleasure to discover that the person sent to save the universe has time to pick up a hamster en route, it's perhaps more likely that you'll find that you visit the place once or twice before deciding all the clutter isn't worth the price exacted by the lengthy loading sequence.





Some larger enemies can, when sufficiently battered, be climbed on and used as offensive vehicles. However, since areas are often locked until you clear the enemies within, there's no scope to explore while riding beasts



DANTE'S INFERNO

FORMAT: 360, PS3 (VERSION TESTED), PSP
RELEASE: OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** EA
DEVELOPER: VISCERAL GAMES **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E204, E205, E210

"I heard on all sides, lamentations uttered" wrote Dante Alighieri, as he opened his ears to those eternally condemned by his imagination. So too has Visceral Games grown familiar with cries of damnation in recent times, as news of its reimagining of Alighieri's 14th century poem as a hack-and-slash videogame has been met with almost universal scorn. Relax, say we. Dante, for one, would be only too delighted at the thought of his hellish visions being thrust upon a new godless generation, and the threat of QTEs can only heighten the awfulness of his metaphors.

Besides, in truth the classic threatened with desecration at this developer's hands isn't so much Alighieri's as David Jaffe's. For while the language and tone of the game are lifted verbatim from The Divine Comedy, almost every other aspect of *Dante's Inferno* is stolen from *God Of War*. Dante, a crusader's cross stitched to his bare, ripped chest and with Death's scythe in his hands, is almost indistinguishable from Kratos in the hands. He double-jumps around 3D environments with skittish abandon, tearing Hell's minions limb from limb in strings of melee and ranged attacks, landing showboating finishing blows by following incongruous button prompts. He harvests souls and augments abilities to reveal his full, predestined potential. In terms of its systems and ideas, *Dante's Inferno* fails to flare passions due to its sheer familiarity.

Neither do those imports from the source poem. For one, Hell hath lost its sting in our popular culture. The waxy crimson walls and monstrous visions that inhabit these halls feel like stock videogame tropes nowadays, closer to the recycled parody of *Brütal Legend* than an actualisation of our most feared punishments. As such, there are few moments here to move a player to celibacy, the literalised sins represented in the game's enemies and environments as much there to provide titillating context (both violent and sexual) as disincentive for moral depravity. As you bat back knife-wielding babies that leap towards you from the exposed nipples of a 50-foot topless Cleopatra zombie, your primary concern will probably be that no one walk in on this ridiculous scene, rather than for the fate of your soul.

Dante's significance rests on the quality of the tribute. The systems it bases its world upon are undeniably robust, and the levelling metagame is engaging, but the execution in play feels routine, and its platforming aspects throw up too many instant and infuriating deaths. As with all entries in this genre, the highlights are the boss battles, which in drawing from the most potent of Catholic nightmares and featuring famous sinners from history provide the game's standout moments. But in the wider context, *Dante's Inferno* fails to rise above its peers, the punishment for which is not damnation, merely a place in limbo. **[6]**



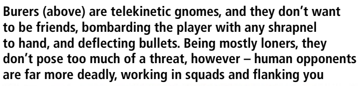
The battle system encourages showboating combos, but these require none of the timing and grace of, say, *Bayonetta*. Raise the combo high enough and the game will make shrill exclamations such as "Biblical!"

Beyond good and evil

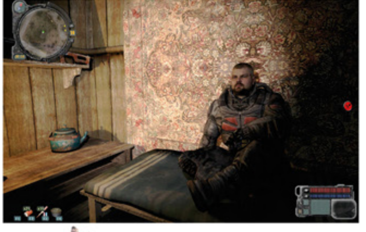
Impale an enemy upon the tip of your scythe and you'll have a choice to punish or absolve them via a finishing move. Punishment earns you Unholy points, opening up offensive moves for purchase on Dante's ability tree, while absolution earns Holy points that unlock new defensive and ranged attacks. If the character is a notable soul from history – a Pontius Pilate, Elektra or Marc Anthony – then a *Gitaroo Man*-style minigame must be played after absolution, in which you tap buttons in time with prompts to absolve their sins and reward Dante with bonus souls. The two paths to mastery are not, as you might expect, mutually exclusive, and balancing upgrades between each branch of the development tree is important throughout.







Burers (above) are telekinetic gnomes, and they don't want to be friends, bombarding the player with any shrapnel to hand, and deflecting bullets. Being mostly loners, they don't pose too much of a threat, however – human opponents are far more deadly, working in squads and flanking you







The road to Pripyat isn't immediately open to the player. The Zone is a tricky place to navigate, and you'll need a guide and, later, backup to get from one zone to the next. Even with an armed company of men, the tunnel that eventually takes you farther into the Zone is one of the game's most unrelenting, fraught sections





STALKER: CALL OF PRIPYAT

FORMAT: PC **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: BITCOMPOSER GAMES **DEVELOPER:** GSC GAME WORLD

Here's one truism to have been lost in the abattoir of recent horror fare: the fear of death is to be more dreaded than death itself. While survival-horror staples like *Resident Evil* have exchanged sparse shocks for an unstaunched tide of the red stuff, Ukrainian developer GSC shows itself to be one of the few remaining masters of profound foreboding.

Set shortly after the events of *Stalker: Shadow Of Chernobyl*, the third game in the hybrid horror-shooter-RPG series follows Major Alexander Degtyaryov, sent into the irradiated wasteland around the Chernobyl nuclear plant to search for missing military personnel. The Zone is a place that exudes threat. Its industrial complexes have now been reclaimed by a wilderness tortured with the reality-bending after-effects of the blast and prowled by mutated creatures, bandits and Stalkers – fortune hunters scouring the area for artefacts produced by its many anomalies.

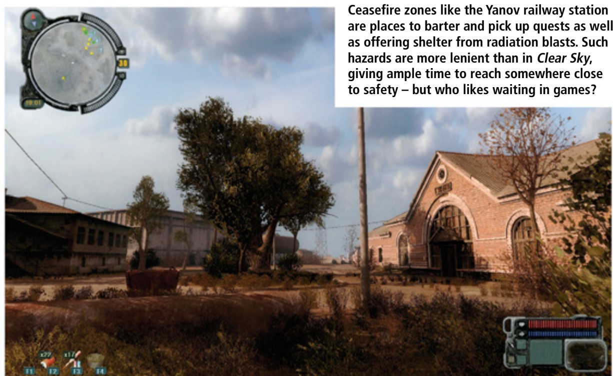
Disguised as one such Stalker, you set about bargaining, sneaking and shooting your way through the Zone, largely in that order of preference – there's little point spending your meagre ration of bullets on the wildlife if you can avoid it, and it's possible to keep the majority of human factions friendly. But nothing comes for free in the Zone: staying neutral has repercussions far down the line, although you won't know you've even made a decision at the time. This can be frustrating, but *Stalker*'s inscrutable ways make a change from the heavily signposted moral seesaw of other games.

Divided into three open areas based on real-life locations – the valley near Zaton, the area around the Jupiter radio manufacturing plant, and Pripyat itself – *Stalker* doesn't attempt to compete with the scale of other open-world games, or indeed their graphical finesse. Nonetheless, for such desolation, the environments have been lavishly seeded with diversions, its deserted (or are they?) buildings and perplexing anomalies arousing fear and curiosity in equal measure.

As with *Stalker: Clear Sky*, daily radioactive blasts force you to seek shelter in places you would normally avoid – but as the game progresses this device becomes a bit of a chore. Nightfall, too, begins as an occasion of great menace, but quickly becomes one you simply circumvent through the rigmarole of returning to base and sleeping. Nonetheless, these two systems can push you out of your comfort zone and into the dark, wherein all manner of horrors lurk.

It's a little disappointing, then, that when something does lurch out at you, its terror is quickly lost: the enemy design is aesthetically overcooked, verging on cartoonish, and the AI, while creating formidable opponents, acts in ways that break the game's spell. The Bloodsuckers' fondess for running round and round the player, flickering in and out of visibility, makes them hard to fight, but it's an awkward, incoherent tactic that signals them as videogame contrivance. The gnomish Burers, meanwhile, would seem more at home in Azeroth than Ukraine.

This is part of a wider issue with *Stalker*: its minor but ever-present incompetencies are the hangover of shooters from another age. Its clunking cutscenes, its failure to handle complex interactions, its foot-snagging geometry, its dogmatic insistence on having the player's stilted gait broken by bouts of exhaustion every hundred yards – these are quaint irritations, things easily forgiven five years ago, but not so digestible in 2010. Clearly, this is a game with ambitions that now outstrip the confines of an atrophying engine, but beneath the exterior lies a world rich in atmosphere – the credible and pervading horror of a landscape drawn with unusual finesse. For all its flaws, then, it is a call that is difficult to resist. **[7]**

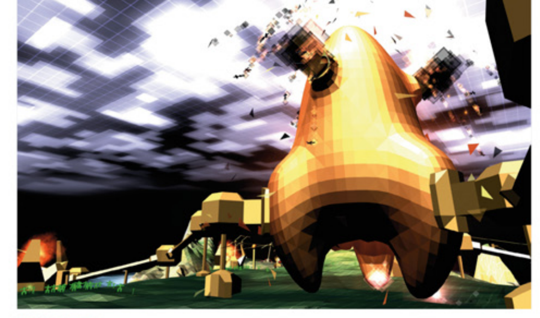


Ceasefire zones like the Yanov railway station are places to barter and pick up quests as well as offering shelter from radiation blasts. Such hazards are more lenient than in *Clear Sky*, giving ample time to reach somewhere close to safety – but who likes waiting in games?

Anomalous materials



Call Of Pripyat **scales up the unique weirdness that its anomalies represent; often they are landmarks in themselves, and on rare occasions some thought is required before venturing into them to obtain the valuable artefacts they produce. But they are not quite as puzzling as they could be – one anomaly restructures space to confound the player's attempt to pass through it, but more often than not the solution is simply a large supply of medkits and anti-radiation drugs.**



Over time, the initially feeble Darwinians evolve a handful of their own useful powers. You'll almost always have to contend with a few clueless stragglers no matter how well you guide them, though



DARWINIA+

FORMAT: 360 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: INTROVERSION SOFTWARE
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

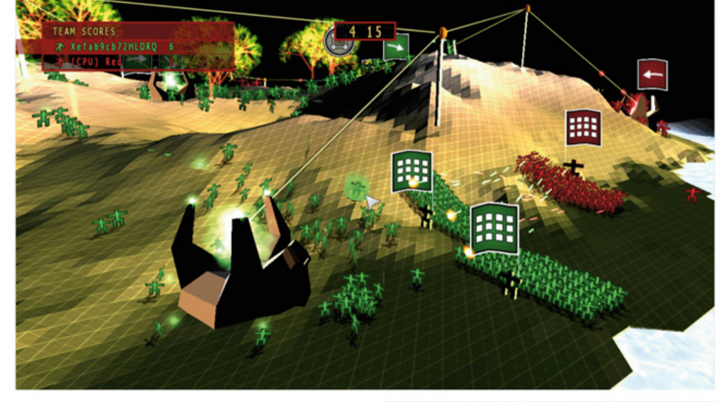
Doctor, doctor



Dr Sepulveda, named after an avenue in LA, remains an ideal guide to the world he has brought to life. Although he's never more than an animated headshot, he provides a pleasantly fallible human core to a game that could otherwise become slightly cold or arch. The fact that, during development, he was represented by a photograph of – who else? – Sir Clive Sinclair only reinforces *Darwinia+*'s quirky British sensibilities.

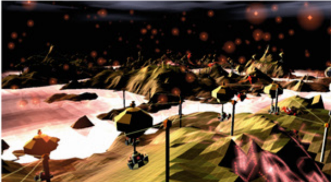
Darwinia has evolved. Introversion's Tron-age anti-god sim has been steadily updating itself for the last five years, of course, but *Darwinia+* has found room for consolidation and polish even as it's shifted the focus from keyboard to joypad. It's still as easy as ever to be snared by the ageless visuals, riddled with Euclidian trees and vector ravines (all brought to life by a colour scheme that has a hint of evangelical mania in its blooms and bruises), but beneath all that is a confident port. Despite the vestigial mouse pointer that perpetually hovers over the polygonal battlefield, this is a PC game that feels entirely at home on a console.

The controls are workable without being excessively refined: the speed of the camera can seem sluggish, but the thumbsticks and triggers provide a perfectly acceptable means of getting around and zooming in and out of the action. Switching between different units won't snap you straight to them, but that turns out to be a smart idea given the game's emphasis on scouting ahead, since you can control most of your minions remotely. Equally, the low head count for building engineers and squads, along with the straightforward objectives, means that Introversion's digital allegory is naturally far more suited to the limited inputs of Xbox 360 than the raging warfare of *Command & Conquer* has ever been.



Meanwhile, another trek through *Darwinia*'s campaign serves as a reminder that, while Introversion's game is powerfully simple, it's rarely traditional with it. This tale of theme parks, pixellated plagues and the forces of entropy was arguably never really an RTS in the first place. It certainly doesn't look like one, with the traditional battlefields replaced with crackling archipelagos, and it doesn't really play like one either, its focus on direct control meaning you almost never have to multitask.

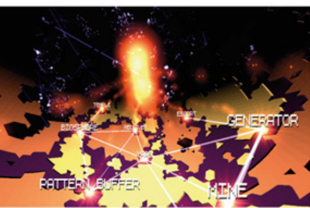
Instead, *Darwinia* breaks itself down into a series of unofficial stages, each one quietly satisfying, as you purify a contaminated Eden with lasers and grenades before bringing it back to life, one hulking relic at a time. Units are simple to master, even if each has its distinct quirks, and the evolution of your own powers beautifully complements the way the plot moves ever outwards towards its delightful punchline.



The islands of Darwinia refuse to age, as the game slinks towards its half-decade mark. Live Arcade titles rarely have such a confident sense of their own identity

But *Darwinia+* is generous as well as thoughtful, finding the room to include a tweaked version of *Multiwinia* alongside the singleplayer game. Turning a rather cerebral pleasure into something more visceral, there's a rich choice of game modes on offer, from the all-out brutality of Domination to more objective-based treats like Blitzkrieg and Rocket Race. The focus on capture points and herding makes for a painless transition from the main campaign, even if the emphasis is on a significantly more frantic kind of fun as you master the art of fighting on multiple fronts.

Inevitably, it's the game's vision as much as its content that makes it great – and, in this sense, *Darwinia*'s theme park plotline remains entirely appropriate. Just as with a wander around Anaheim or Isla Nublar, it's never what you do as much as where you are that really matters here. The details of each individual victory may fade with time, but you'll never forget the fractal patchwork rippling beneath you, or the stormy static of the clouds that clash overhead. **[8]**







It would be entirely wrong to view the *Multiwinia* content as a mere side offering, because it's generous in its scope. Watching masses of tiny green and red stickmen exchanging laser fire is one of the real treats of Xbox Live Arcade





DEATH BY CUBE

FORMAT: 360 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX DEVELOPER: PREMIUM AGENCY

If the greatest strength of any twin-stick shooter is immediacy, it's oddly reassuring to discover that it takes only 15 seconds for a developer like Premium Agency to make the whole thing feel muddled, alien and overwrought. Grafting a story of amnesiac robots on to a progress system that sees you fumbling with in-game currencies to unlock even tutorial levels, *Death By Cube*'s frontend is a masterclass in inaccessibility. It's almost a relief to be left to untangle the subsequent snarl of pickups, combos, and loadouts by yourself.

If it kicks off like few other twin-sticks, it doesn't look like them either. Built from sparse backdrops against which abstract enemies erupt in gouts of thick blood, it's a divisive aesthetic, but an unforgettable one. The clash, as monochrome order gives way to gratuitous particle effects, creates a raw energy, while a protagonist who looks like Gort from The Day The Earth Stood Still after a trip through the Beanie Baby factory merely reinforces the pleasant sensation that you might have stumbled on to a game that's been released entirely by accident.



Laser pickups allow you to wield astonishing power for a few seconds, although the odds are mostly against you. Multiplayer support is included, but it's not the game's strongest suit

It's no accident, though. Behind the madness, *Death By Cube* is that rarest of birds: a twin-stick shooter with new ideas. By taking away the genre's most reliable advantage – no matter how weak you are, you're normally significantly speedier than your enemies – it creates mechanics that bend the game in unexpected directions. The ability to project shields allows you to collect incoming shots before flinging them back, while a teleporting dodge leaves enemies one step behind you, distracted by a luminous ghost. Both moves encourage you to put strafing aside and turn each stage into a rush of guerrilla encounters, but they only reveal their true tactical potential when survival rounds hand over to base attacks and events that task you with chipping away at hulking obstacles.

Death By Cube balances strategic depths with twitchier impulses, but ultimately it's too fiddly to make it a twin-stick classic. Importantly, though, it shows that this most predictable of genres is still capable of throwing out interesting surprises. **[6]**





Death By Cube's signature move is appropriately titled Mass Confusion, as you warp through enemies, leaving them reeling in your wake, then zoom in close, pull off a multi-kill, and craftily zip away again



UNDEAD KNIGHTS

FORMAT: PSP RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: TECMO KOEI DEVELOPER: TEAM TACHYON







You grab an enemy to transform them, and the higher their health, the longer it takes – so the more likely they are to escape. You can't release an enemy if you've nabbed the wrong one, which makes the flawed auto-targeting more annoying

If you've played a videogame lately, you may have noticed a zombie or two. Unlike in the best works of George A Romero, however, their rising numbers are inducing not terror but fatigue. It's an unfortunate backdrop for the release of *Undead Knights*, a game that's never in danger of surprising you in its concept or execution – though it does a very nice line in promises that are never quite delivered on.

You choose between one of three warriors, all of whom have been wronged by a nasty king, and set about grabbing enemies and turning them into the undead – who then follow your orders. There's a helping of *Stubbs The Zombie* as the 'team' rather haplessly takes the whacks for you, and a great deal of *Overlord* in how you direct them around: point at enemies and they'll begin munching away, at a structure and they'll collapse it, at a puzzle and they'll solve it.

There are some interesting ideas here, but in practice the game is overloaded with cut corners and blunting repetition. There are very few character models, so you'll play through almost the entire thing with blue zombies fighting yellow troops. The controls are passable when the action involves wandering around and hitting things, but the grab command in incorporated via an auto-target with an unerring knack for picking exactly the wrong enemy. Most damningly, there's just no significant variation until right at the end: you're charged with doing the same thing, again and again, and then doing it some more.

Amid all of the corpses, there remains a spark of life, but it'll take a sequel with much higher production values, an improved control system and some gestures towards variety to fan it into full consciousness. **[4]**





Puzzles involve knocking things down or building zombie bridges for progression, and they're fun the first time around. The bigger enemies that have to be distracted by throwing zombies at them before you wade in are more entertaining



SUPER MONKEY BALL: STEP & ROLL

FORMAT: WII **RELEASE:** OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** SEGA **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE **PREVIOUSLY:** E206, E210

For a few horrible seconds, that subtitle, with its air of faddish callisthenics, is enough to make you fear that *Monkey Ball* has rebranded itself as a high-sugar competitor to Wii Fit. *Step & Roll* hasn't jumped on to the exercise bandwagon just yet, but it has stepped up to the Balance Board, and the result is a competent enough roll 'em up with bright colours, decent control options, and no real reason to exist.

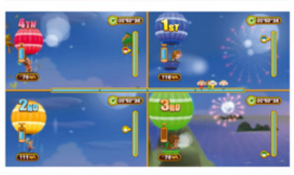
Super Monkey Ball was always refreshingly cruel: a game series that exerted a ferocious pull because it regularly demanded total mastery. Built for the degree of precision found in your fingers rather than your wrist, a transition to tilt – or weight-wobbling – controls was inevitably going to lead to a dilution of the series' peculiar thrills.

Sega's designers have behaved perfectly honourably, getting the most from both Remote and Balance Board – the latter of which you use, as expected, by shifting your weight in the direction you want to move – but they've also had to flatten the difficulty curve, throwing you into a lot of wide arenas with scooped lips, and rarely flinging turns at you without dropping you into a shallow groove first. While that's enough to stave off frustration, it robs the game of any kind of pulse-quickening dangers, and a generous suite of minigames, ranging from the delightful to the utterly dozy, aren't enough to shock *Step & Roll* back to life.

The second generation of Wii titles has seen a lot of developers drift from brutal comedy to quiet tragedy, as an era of hilarious mishap gives way to games that understand the limitations of the platform and desperately self-medicate, taking the edge off any challenge in exchange for baseline playability. Within that context, *Step & Roll* is arguably one of the better options, its colour and character surviving the transition, even if its mechanics have been shot full of tranquilisers. It's not lazy or unworkable, then, merely pleasant, compromised, and irrelevant. **[5]**







The minigames are exhaustive, but not entirely successful. Monkey Target has been softened (and, more importantly for the controls, slowed down), while Monkey Snowboard is strangely weightless and lacking in drama



The Balance Board sensitivity is well calibrated, and a decent co-op mode allows one player to roll through the map while the other rides shotgun, clearing obstacles away with the Remote



ACE ATTORNEY INVESTIGATIONS: MILES EDGEWORTH

FORMAT: DS **RELEASE:** FEBRUARY 19 **PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE



Miles Edgeworth, *Ace Attorney*'s arrogant anti-hero, makes like Lewis, Mork and Frasier and spins off. Fans have long held Capcom's adventures in the world of law as the greatest TV show never made, so the development is none too surprising. But where its TV predecessors see single characters go it alone, Edgeworth never strays far from his original co-stars. Packed with cameos, this is but one Wright short of being an outright sequel.

After four games of showing us the prosecutor as courtroom bully, Capcom wisely keeps Edgeworth out of the stand, focusing instead on the pre-match investigation. Where Wright was always weakest at the crime scene, a new thirdperson view and a logic ability – pairing clues that complement each other – give Edgeworth's snooping a point-and-click flavour. Visually interesting, sure, but by mimicking a more open genre it only serves to reinforce how linear his progress really is.

Linear it may be, but removing the courthouse does free up the traditional plot structure. Investigation can blend with cross-examination (although with no judge around you wonder who is determining the pertinence of your questioning), and twists can occur at any moment. Edgeworth's obsession with knowing the facts also helps the pace; Wright's infuriating leaps of logic are a thing of the past.

Conversely, the story doesn't rival those of previous instalments. A major flashback is pure fan fodder, but the plot lacks the slight unpleasantness that tinted Wright's best cases. There are still killers, but their motivations are more straightforward. Soon, you're pining for the melodramatic heft of prosecutors gone bad and murderous ghosts. And by constantly changing his sidekick, Edgeworth is denied the relationship depth that has helped unite *Ace Attorney*s past.

As stubbornly non-interactive as the *Ace Attorney* games are, it's a very specific flavour of non-interactivity to which fans subscribe. In this light, *Investigations* feels a little more throwaway than usual. **[6]**





Capcom struggles to find Edgeworth a suitable rival. Interpol agent Shi Long Lang fills the role, but as fellow lawmen their conflict seems forced

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XBOX 360
LIVE
CRACKDOWN

TIME EXTEND

CRACKDOWN

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS**
DEVELOPER: **REALTIME WORLDS**
ORIGIN: **SCOTLAND**
RELEASE: **2007**



The ultimate stripped-back superhero sandbox, Crackdown proved not just that less is more, but that it could be, for hapless addicts, a little too much

There was no single off-on moment, no switch that flipped. No particular number between one and 499 indicated the six months of sleepless nights spent in Pacific City thereafter, scouring every rooftop, every gangway, pipe and outcrop for that final 500th glowing Agility Orb. Even those who are usually unmoved by the frivolous, timewasting allure of collectibles found their resolve eroded by *Crackdown*'s method of subtle, gradual ingratiation – a self-destructive habit formed almost without perception during the course of play. Collecting Agility Orbs may have begun as a distraction from decimating drug cartels – one of a number of side dishes in the buffet meal of *Crackdown*'s crime-ridden open world – but by the time the murderous main course was being cleared away we were licking the plates, fervently gathering up the remaining morsels. Finding Agility Orbs was now the game's sole function, the crime bosses having been months in the ground as we tracked down the remaining few. It wasn't mania or obsession, we told ourselves, it was just tidiness.

Despite the brilliance with which Crackdown hooked us on hunting Agility Orbs, its imitators largely fail to realise why it was so successful

Despite the ruthless brilliance with which *Crackdown* hooked us on hunting Agility Orbs, the game's imitators have largely failed to realise why it was so successful. *Assassin's Creed*'s flags managed only to be boring and obscure. *Infamous*' radioactive shards offered some reward, but only increased the player's power in an indirect, faintly unsatisfactory way. Not even Ubisoft's second attempt in *Assassin's Creed II* managed to nail the perfect feedback loop that *Crackdown* pioneered. The game has the most comprehensible of all rewards: doing something makes you better at doing that very thing. You start the game as a gene-boosted superhero, but your powers continue to increase; shooting a bad guy amplifies your firearm's heft, just as roadkill garners you upgrades to your vehicles. Agility Orbs, most palpably and thrillingly *super* of all, increase the height and distance you can jump, allowing you to scale ever-taller buildings and collect more orbs – feeding the compulsion further.

Collecting Agility Orbs is a reward in itself. Stumbling into a grubby backstreet and finding a flag is no great drama, but leaping over and around the high-rise buildings of Pacific City is a joy, as visually rewarding as it is a reminder of your power, and Agility Orbs are located on every promontory, steeple and skyscraper, commanding you to bound ceaselessly across the rooftops in their pursuit. Their brazen placement is significant because, unlike the flags of *Assassin's Creed*, they are there to be seen at all times, challenging you to scale the landmarks they sit upon.

The invitation isn't a subtle one, given that each Agility Orb glows green, shoots a beam of light into the sky and emits a ringing sound – but this is par for the course in a game so unashamed by its mechanics. While other games fuss with cutscenes in timid reproductions of *GTA*'s cinematic



BETA BOOST

***Crackdown*'s later stages of development found it in a bit of trouble. With Microsoft asking for 360 exclusivity, but delivering the hardware fairly late on, another year was added to the project. Further tumult occurred with the decision to switch to the latest Renderware engine, when Realtime Worlds found itself woefully understaffed. With Microsoft's internal marketing analysis prophesying doom, the decision was made to bundle the game with an access code to the *Halo 3* multiplayer beta. It may have been this that put the game in the hands of such a large audience, but it was *Crackdown*'s charms alone that kept them playing.**

aspirations, *Crackdown* homes in on the essential delight of causing mayhem in a city space. Though polluted with pop-up videos detailing the banal fiction behind your criminal quarries, *Crackdown* is otherwise an almost pure expression of a game resplendent in the absence of narrative. You want scene-setting? Here is your car, agent. Now kill some racial stereotypes.

And then, a matter of seconds later, the tunnel disgorges you and your car into the air, ploughing down, through a band of gangsters and into the city. There is no restriction – no invisible walls, no bridges to be built or memory blocks to be synchronised. Enemies, henchmen and kingpins can be assassinated in any order from nearly any direction. While defeating lesser enemies reduces the defensive capabilities of the big boss, creating some sense of strategic progression, *Crackdown* is a game almost in defiance of linear structure.

It's easy to wonder whether this is luck or judgement – was this Realtime Worlds prudently trimming off the flab, or did the game simply lack craft? Certainly, it is crude in many aspects – its melee combat is without nuance, its gunplay mindless, its driving model lacking in friction and finesse. The city, too: although its sprawling suburbs have a certain splendour when viewed from on high, it is often ugly in its details, many doorways opening into small cube-like rooms. Even the climbing, the linchpin of our addiction, is imprecise, particularly when compared to the manoeuvrings of Nathan Drake, Altaïr and Ezio.

But *Crackdown*'s climbing, though primitive, is in some ways more meaningful than *Uncharted*'s prescriptive routes or Altaïr's unchallenged parkour skills: with the limited capabilities of *Crackdown*'s cumbersome agent, the game forces careful thought about what can be scaled and how best to approach it. This is matched not with predetermined puzzles but with thrilling improvisation on the part of the player, finding the near-imperceptible ledge that allows you to shimmy around a skyscraper and leap to another structure, or the sequence of jumps that will propel you through the air above Pacific City and straight down into the enemy's den. Power up your driving stats, and you can use the upgraded Agency 4X4 to drive up the side of the toughest gang's skyscraper fortress, straight to the kingpin.

Allowing players to create their own solutions in this way, however inelegant, is *Crackdown*'s gift – but again it begs the question whether it was the result of assiduous design

Power up your driving stats, and you can use the upgraded 4X4 to drive up the side of the toughest gang's skyscraper fortress, straight to the kingpin

Aesthetically, *Crackdown* is a mix of dynamic and uninspiring. There's a cel-shaded heft to the character models, in a nod to comic-book inspirations, but the many buildings of Pacific City don't have quite the same charisma





Crackdown was among the first games to really test the delights of multiplayer in an open-world setting. Players can compete in joint events, co-operate to take out bosses, or simply boot each other off buildings

Though the freeform nature of the game has the potential to offer varied approaches, the unsophisticated gunplay and endless, undisguised enemy respawning mean the player often ends up using his height advantage to head straight into the centre and simply kick the boss to death







The Gettin' Busy DLC pack includes a harpoon gun for affixing gangsters to moving cars so that they flutter behind like pendants. Also a pleasure is the MSK Lobber, which fires missiles into the air in drunken twirling trajectories, before they lock on to a target

or a lack of it. In a world given so exclusively to freeform, knockabout mayhem, it is no surprise that the Agility Orb rises to the top as the dipstick of progression. Yet even this – for many, the game's primary driving motivation – was a late addition to the design, one of the very final ideas to be implemented. Then there are the Hidden Orbs, which take on a far more prosaic collectible form and are subsequently much less compulsive; although they deliver a stat-boost divided among all your skills, locating them never matches conquering a skyscraper, and never feeds back into your ability to find the others.

Yet in hunting that final Agility Orb, we inevitably uncovered the vast majority of their perversely secreted siblings. Not that the Agility Orb was anywhere particularly obscure. Indeed, the final few Agility Orbs were in obvious, easily reached low-lying areas – orbs not deemed worthy of attention in the early hours of the game. One was nestled in the rafters of the stadium on the north-western island. Another was brazenly sat atop a gas tower, somehow overlooked, in the Puregy fuel refinery. In the search for the final orb we scoured every location time and time again, a nightly vigil lasting a good portion of the year. By this time a patch had been released to amplify the noise the orbs made, making them easier to locate – its effect was lost on us. Maps, walkthroughs and video guides were available – but the game's grip was so strong by this time that we had adopted an insane, self-flagellating dogma. This was our dragon, and we alone would defeat it.

Eventually, we felled the beast atop a building on the south-eastern point of the north-eastern island. The misnamed Hightower stands apart from the other high-rises there – actually comprised of two moderately tall towers bridged by chunky gantries to form a giant lopsided 'H'. It looks out over a roadway, then across branching waterways towards the monstrous Insight Counter Services compound. The Bastard Orb, as it had become known, was sat in between the two towers, their rising forms partly obscuring it from the most obvious angles of approach, or so we tell ourselves. There was no elation – barely even excitement – just doleful acknowledgement of its presence and a sense of relief that it was all over.

We have met many fellow victims – people who answer the question of whether they liked *Crackdown* with a flash of pain and a furrowed brow: "*Well…*" But love and loathe it as we do, there is no denying its potent, pure mechanics – it remains a mystery that so few games have successfully emulated its undeniable draw. We both eagerly await and dread its sequel – hopefully, until then, we can remain on the wagon. Although we couldn't help but notice, as we revisited Pacific City this one last time, that we had only 24 Hidden Orbs left to find. And 276 is such an untidy number.



KEY DEVELOPMENT

One of several free updates to the game saw the introduction of a debug mode, entitled Keys To The City, allowing players to access cheats – permitting them to spawn objects and max out their skills. Simultaneously, premium DLC was released, introducing new weaponry and side events. Irritatingly, and presaging *Dragon Age*'s similar rudeness, the start markers for these DLC-only events appeared in the normal game, reminding you that you hadn't purchased the DLC whenever you ran past them. However, given the DLC's huge uptake, it appears to be a strategy that works. Certainly, having swept the city clean of glowing green orbs, you could hardly tolerate the presence of this further untidy clutter.





Here it is – the final Agility Orb. It's obscured from behind by the towers, and the limited draw-distance means it is invisible from the buildings on the other side of the water. We should have seen it from the road below, and there were two other orbs directly above it which we collected without any problem

"The reality of code-breaking is a lot less exciting than it is in the movies," says Chris Delay. "In the movies you can do a really inspired hack in one evening. In reality, it's months of research"





THE MAKING OF... UPLINK

How a simple hacking game launched an entire company – and made an unlikely star of the humble progress bar

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **INTROVERSION SOFTWARE** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** ORIGIN: **UK** RELEASE: **2001**

On a dark and stormy night in the year 2000, **Chris Delay**, a recent graduate from Imperial College London, and a man who had just put the finishing touches to a computer game about abusing the internet in the name of corporate hacking, sat down to abuse the internet in the name of social hacking instead. "It was a little guerrilla warfare effort," Delay laughs, recalling his first attempts at grassroots marketing. "We didn't have any money to spend on adverts, so what we did was log on to videogame sites and start raving about this new game, *Uplink*. We only did ten or so sites each, though. By that point, we started talking to our hardcore fanbase instead, and they got the word out themselves, doing all these promotional things which we'd help them organise."

That Delay could rely on fans was astonishing in itself. Not only was *Uplink* an austere indie game with graphics that made it look like productivity software, but as an extra-curricular student project it came with no real pedigree. Even Introversion, the developer listed on the box, was something of an afterthought, initially.

Introversion's founders (along with Delay, the core team was initially composed of **Mark Morris** and Tom Arundel) met while studying at Imperial in the late '90s. By the time the three entered their final year, Delay had been working on *Uplink* for a number of months. It was to be a game about hackers, inspired by the kind of techno-fetishist movies that would appeal to computer science students. WarGames was a major influence, with its floating dread, fallible AIs and air of isolated sadness, while Sneakers, a movie that turned call-bouncing (the art of feeding a dial-up connection through relays around the world in order to slow down any traces) into intense drama, provided a racy blast of corporate paranoia.

"*Uplink* was what I did between lectures," says Delay. "I was originally just going to finish it and give it away for free as a way of getting into the industry." It was Morris and Arundel who had the idea of turning the game into a business by itself.

"The catalyst for Introversion was this new entrepreneurial competition they were running back then at Imperial," remembers Morris. "You wrote a business plan, and the best plan would win £10,000. Tom and I were looking at writing one anyway, but we thought this might be fun, and we might win ten grand.

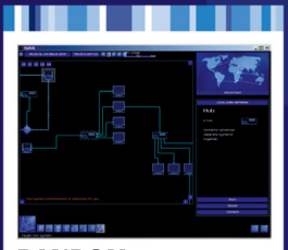
"Uplink was what I did between lectures. I was just going to finish it and give it away for free as a way of getting into the industry"

"We approached Chris and told him we'd like to use *Uplink* as the basis to start a game development company within the context of the competition. We weren't really intending on starting a real business. But it became clear to us that we weren't going to win the competition, and by that point we had a pretty sensible and sustainable strategy to grow a company. So we ditched the competition and put our efforts into launching Introversion instead."

Uplink took roughly 18 months for Delay to complete – a creative process that relied so heavily on personal secrecy that the sole programmer was largely unwilling to show his future partners what he was actually building. And although he started with a fairly clear idea of the game he wanted to make, he admits that *Uplink* changed a great deal during development.

"Originally it was much more cyberpunk," Delay winces. "It had this really crappy 3D flying-through-tunnels effect whenever you connected to a computer. You were going to be this hacker who was physically plugged into the machine, with IV drips and that kind of thing, and you could fry enemies' brains."

The finished game played it straight, however, ditching the voguish future tech in favour of things a computer-literate audience could already relate to. *Uplink* still casts you as a hacker for hire, and centres on a sinister plot to destroy the entire internet, but the whole thing unfolds on a simple OS desktop, and relies on the player running programs, dialling into servers, and even engaging in prosaic activities like attaching documents to emails in order to create a rich world of corporate espionage from carefully chosen minutiae. Without the budget to make a cinematic game in the same way an established studio might – employing cutscenes, voice acting and 3D graphics – Delay had to approach things from an oblique angle. "I realised that setting it much more down-to-Earth would make it a lot more interesting," he says. "It means that you, the player, were your character. You



RANDOM ENCOUNTERS

According to *Uplink*, the life of a hacker is cruel and often short: failure in Introversion's game generally results in a restart from the very beginning, and the vagaries of espionage mean that you didn't always see the net tightening around you. "One of the most intense things about *Uplink* is that you may never know when you're about to get caught," enthuses Delay. "You can be traced during an actual hack, or you can complete the hack successfully but leave behind logs of your activity that will eventually lead the authorities to you. That means that, at any point in the future, you may suddenly find that the screen goes black, and that's it: game over. You never know whether you're being watched, and that leads to an incredible amount of paranoia."

were actually logging in to these computers from your own computer: you were actually in the game. It's total fiction."

It also meant that the game would prove strangely timeless – as stylish and refined today as it was nine years ago. Delay's gamble on software that pretends to be software paid off, and rather than diminish the cinematic thrill, it actually pulls you deeper into the experience. Play *Uplink* late at night with the lights dimmed, a cigarette burning in a nearby ashtray and your fingers drumming on the desk while you wait for a password cracker to do its work, and your whole environment becomes part of the fun. You're living on the edge, and the handful of simple tasks the game recycles – setting up call-bounce relays, scanning and deleting files, and painstakingly removing any signs that you were ever there – have a unique power to generate real tension.

If that sounds a bit like roleplaying, it's probably because, beneath the peculiar interface, *Uplink* is in fact an RPG, with tools and technology you'll need to upgrade over time and a simple mini-quest structure to tug you through the story. "There's quite a strong *Frontier: Elite II* flavour to *Uplink*," muses Delay. "That was one of my favourite games on the Amiga. You're a space trader flying around the galaxy, you can visit



Wish fulfilment lies at the core of the game. "When we were at Imperial, we all wanted to do these kind of hacks," says Delay. "But we never did it, because we didn't want to spend the rest of our lives in jail"

any star system, and you start out with a really little shuttle that you gradually improve. We duplicated that, very deliberately, in *Uplink*. Your gateway computer and the spaceships from *Frontier*: there's a very direct analogue there. So much so that, when accepting new missions from the bulletin board in *Uplink*, you can have a little chat with the people offering the missions, and if you look closely at the text scrolling by, it's credited as the Frontier text system."

games that we weren't as scared as we should have been. These days, it would be very hard for us to make a game like *Uplink*, because we would just be asking ourselves: 'Is this too removed? How are we going to make any of this fun?' But back then, it was just the frenzy of the clicking; the fact that you are under surveillance and you only have a certain amount of time actually generates a real sense of danger. That's where *Uplink*'s long-term appeal comes from."

> "The fact that you are under surveillance and you only have a certain amount of time actually generates a real sense of danger"

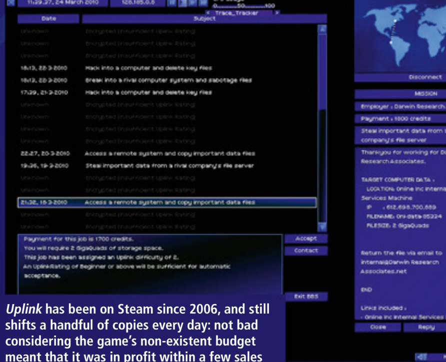
At the heart of the game, however, lies the call-bouncing system: a tense duel of loading bars, ironically for a PC title, which sees you downloading secret intel while you monitor the progress of the authorities as they try to trace you to your location. "When Chris said to me he was making a game about hacking, I couldn't envisage it at first," Morris admits. "We were dealing with abstracts, really, but we were so new to making

The team's innocence

regarding game design spilled over into a general naivety towards the wider industry. Rather than courting publishers, once *Uplink* was completed, the fledgling company decided it would distribute its debut title itself. "We didn't really know anything about how it all worked," admits Morris. "I certainly didn't know there were these different entities like publishers and distributors. We just thought: 'We're going to sell this game to punters'. Back then, digital downloads hadn't really taken off yet. We looked into CD replication and didn't have the cash, so we just produced the units ourselves: we got printers, a bit of ink, and we manufactured the boxes and the labels personally. I signed one of the originals a few years ago at E3, which was a wonderful nostalgic experience: back then, we were putting these things in bags and shipping them around the world and, within a couple of months, we couldn't produce enough, so only then did we do an actual production run."

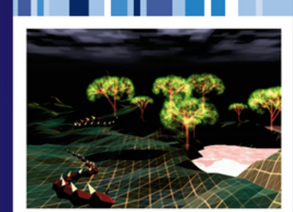






***Uplink* has been on Steam since 2006, and still shifts a handful of copies every day: not bad considering the game's non-existent budget meant that it was in profit within a few sales**

Delay's notebooks offer a look at the process of making *Uplink* – if you can read them. The game's source code was subsequently made available as a free download, but that was unheard of when it was first released. Morris: "Downloading it over a dial-up connection would take longer than an hour. We thought that would be enough to kill the pirates"



LINKUP

Strung through the centre of *Uplink* is a surprisingly involving narrative regarding a mysterious computer plague that could take down the entire internet. With virus names like Faith and Revelation, Introversion's game doesn't shy away from religious allegories, but it also provides a nod to the studio's follow-up, *Darwinia* (above), with a crucial mission that sees you hacking into the databanks of Darwin Research Associates. A tale of a digital Eden beset with a serpent-like corruption, *Darwinia* hardly shies away from allegory either, come to mention it.

With strong word of mouth, *Uplink* became an unlikely hit. The team successfully approached HMV to stock the game in stores, and made a (less successful) deal with the American publisher Strategy First to distribute *Uplink* in the US. The arrangement quickly soured, however, as Introversion's new partner almost immediately went into administration, leaving the developer without a penny.

Since then it's been a bumpy ride. The studio that refers to itself as the last of the bedroom coders now has a staff that hovers around the double figures mark, but sales of its games have been up and down over the years, seemingly with no correlation to overall quality. Smart titles like the Gnostic RTS *Darwinia* and its online offshoot *Multiwinia* have failed, perhaps, to perform as hoped, while *DefCon*, another WarGames-influenced title dealing directly with the cheery prospect of global thermonuclear war, went on to sell far better than expected.

With this month's release of *Darwinia+* for XBLA (see p96), Introversion is hoping that its first foray on to consoles will meet with enough success to allow it to get on with the design of *Subversion* – a mysterious experience involving procedurally generated cities and the developer's trademark neon-light visuals.

How *Subversion* will turn out is impossible to tell, of course. Yet, for the time being, it's just good to know that the team at Introversion are still hunched over their PCs, faces lit only by the glows from their flat-screen monitors, fingers hacking away at keyboards.





Morris: "We approached all the major stores to convince them all to take *Uplink*, and HMV was the only one that came through for us"

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REGION SPECIFIC:
MERSEYSIDE, UK

Together with the likes of Guildford, Dundee and the Warwickshire triangle, Liverpool is one of the original lodestones of UK game development. Indeed, thanks to Psygnosis – since renamed and restructured as Sony's Studio Liverpool – it has global significance as one of the most established of the platform holder's western studios.

Standing proud on the north-west English coast, the region's relative isolation seems only to have strengthened its existence over the years. While other significant developers and publishers on the Manchester side of the M62 motorway have vanished from view, the likes of Bizarre Creations and Evolution Studios have continued to grow, steadily releasing franchises of million-selling software, much of it based around driving very expensive cars, very quickly. Both companies were acquired in substantial deals during 2007; Evolution by Sony and Bizarre Creations by Activision. Their futures are now secure.

Further down the food chain, there are plenty of other companies too, ranging from small startups to established specialist studios, as well as an array of specialist recruitment, outsourcing and production-related outfits. Liverpool John Moores University is also known for its pure science and applied computer game courses, which provide a steady stream of graduates for the industry.

Combined with the rapid regeneration that preempted and followed on from Liverpool's much-vaunted status as European Capital of Culture in 2008, a new confidence is certainly evident within the region, both in terms of wider business activity, and also for the game sector.







BACK TO THE SOURCE

How the old and the new are combining to revitalise the Merseyside dev scene

The main port city of the British Empire for more than a hundred years, it's no surprise that Liverpool's history and wealth have been underpinned by the regular rhythm of departure and arrival. From mass immigration in the 19th century to a sharp industrial decline in the 1970s, its character has been dominated by its connection, through the Irish Sea, to the wider world beyond. After all, it was the availability of American records brought into the country by sailors that kickstarted the Merseybeat sound.

Its place in the world of videogames, however, is more prosaic and surprisingly static, revolving around the location of Microdigital, one of the first computer shops in the UK, which acted as the springboard to some of its earliest and most infamous game developers.

From Bug-Byte (*Manic Miner*) and Software Projects (*Jet Set Willy*) to the spectacular on-camera bankruptcy of Imagine Software, the Liverpool development scene has certainly been through its ups and downs, although it eventually found relative stability in the shape of publisher Psygnosis, and its director Ian Hetherington.

A businessman rather than a gaming visionary, it's Hetherington who can lay claim to being the godfather of the Liverpool videogame industry, even if the acquisition of Evolution Studios by Sony in 2007 seems to have marked his formal retirement from the local industry scene to focus his attention on his other great passion – high-performance cars. (He remains involved with Dundee studio Realtime Worlds, however.)

Despite not being a gamer, it was Hetherington's Psygnosis (co-founded with Jonathan Ellis in 1984) that directly and indirectly provided much of the infrastructure that's enabled the region to flourish, while the development scene in neighbouring Manchester pancaked during the 2000s.

Focusing on top-end graphics and high-quality retail boxes, Psygnosis took advanced-concept games to the next level during the 1990s, while also publishing the games of notable UK studios, such as DMA Design (*Lemmings*), Reflections (*Shadow of the Beast*) and, closer to home, Bizarre Creations.

It was also a case of financial acumen meets right place, right time, as an acquisition by a hungry new entrant into the videogame industry – Japanese consumer electronics company Sony – in 1993, firmly





established Psygnosis, or Sony Liverpool Studio as it's now known, as the linchpin of the city's game-development heritage. Multimillion-selling games such as *Wipeout*, the *Formula One* series and *Colony Wars* followed on.

Ironically, its office at Wavertree Technology Park was originally built for the failed National Lottery bid from local retailing and betting giant Littlewoods. 'It Could Be You' didn't happen for the latter, but as the hub of development, as well the headquarters for all PAL PlayStation quality assurance, it's worked out fine in terms of maintaining Liverpool's game ecosystem.

Yet, despite its quarter-century heritage, Psygnosis/Sony hasn't been the only company on the scene, not by a long shot. Indeed, the most impressive growth has come from the now

"We like to make games and not shout about ourselves too much... We don't have space for big egos. We're much more team-orientated"

200-strong Bizarre Creations, the indie studio that found success with *Formula One* on PlayStation in 1996, and which has focused much of its efforts on the fidelity of high-performance racing ever since. From *Metropolis Street Racer* on Dreamcast to the four *Project Gotham Racing* games on Xbox and Xbox 360, and now the forthcoming multiplatform *Blur*, the company has let its games do the talking.

"You can have the best PR machine, but if the game comes out and flops, everyone looks like an idiot," remarks studio director **Brian Woodhouse** when asked about the company's reticence when it comes to self-publicity. "We like to make games and not shout about ourselves too much," he adds. "We're building games, and it takes a large team to do it. We don't have space for big egos. We're much more team-oriented."

Of course, following its acquisition by the world's largest publisher, Activision Blizzard, in 2007, it doesn't need to do much talking. Indeed, there isn't even a company logo outside its purpose-built studio located next to Liverpool John Lennon Airport.









It's sure to gain plenty of attention when its other project, a James Bond-based game, is released in 2010, however. "Racing has always been central to the studio, but we're committed to the action genre," Woodhouse points out. "It's something we've been working on to make stronger."

There's a similar focus on getting the job done – and on high-performance vehicles – at Liverpool's other major independent studio, which was also snapped up in 2007. Runcorn-based Evolution Studios was another of Ian Hetherington's babies. Set up in 1999 with fellow game entrepreneur Martin Kenwright, it was always tightly connected to Sony's apron strings with five *World Rally Championship* games released on PlayStation2, before PlayStation3 launch title *MotorStorm* smashed its way in to grab the attention of racing fans.

"We did look at other places [to set up], but because of the talent in the region and the incentives available, it makes complete sense"

Following Kenwright and Hetherington's departures along with the acquisition, development veteran **Mick Hocking** now runs Evolution and its sister studio Bigbig, which is based in Leamington Spa. This is combined with him overseeing Studio Liverpool. Hocking says the setup "now feels like one studio spread over two sites".

"They're both long-established, proud and successful studios, so you can't just slam them together and say 'be friends'," he explains of the twinning process that's occurred over the past couple of years. But there's rarely progress without some pain, and even as this Region Specific goes to press, Sony announced a restructuring of the Liverpool Studio. "It has been decided that production on a number of projects within Studio Liverpool will cease immediately due to project prioritisation," it reads. "Our North West Studio Group has been and will continue to be a vital cog in the WWS family, with a history of producing genre defining games such as *MotorStorm*, *Wipeout*, *Formula 1* and *WRC* and this decision will have no impact of the role that the









North West Studio Group will play in the future of all PlayStation platforms." Hocking explains: "We're positioning Studio Liverpool towards a new future within the NW Studio Group, focusing on some exciting new game genres and markets."

There are also startups here, taking advantage of the huge urban regeneration that's followed on from the European City of Culture award in 2008, not to mention the capital expenditure funding and incubation opportunities that are now available for technology companies. One such example is headed by the bullish **John Walsh**, who expects to expand his five-man Redoubt studio into a 60-strong outfit within three years. Backed by Rebellion, Redoubt's mission is to focus on massmarket gaming, working on titles such as kids' TV brand *LazyTown*.

Helped by funding from the North West Regional Development Agency, Redoubt has claimed 35 per cent of its staff costs over that three-year period. "Being based in Liverpool helps mitigate some of the risk of setting up," Walsh says. "We did look at other places but, because of the talent in the region and the incentives available, it makes complete sense."

Interestingly, Rebellion also has another studio in the area. Rebellion Liverpool is technically based in Runcorn and can trace its heritage back to flight simulator developer Rowan, via the Empire Interactive-owned Strangelite. Now with staff numbers at around the 30 mark, it works remotely with Rebellion's main Oxford office, as well as specialising in PSP games.

Our final example of the new breed of Liverpudlian developers is Playbox. Quietly set up in 2005, again by ex-Psygnosis staff, it's battled through the hard times to get to the point where it's now working on its original IP, *Bang Bang Racing*. A fresh-looking racer, it demonstrates the passion for the industry that can be found in the locale.

"When I was working at Pysgnosis, game development was what I wanted to do," says Playbox's managing director and one-time PR man **Gary Nichols**. "Setting up Playbox has been the hardest thing I've done."

But it's this sort of determination that characterises why the Liverpool game scene is still very much alive and kicking, and enjoying the upswing of its current cycle.



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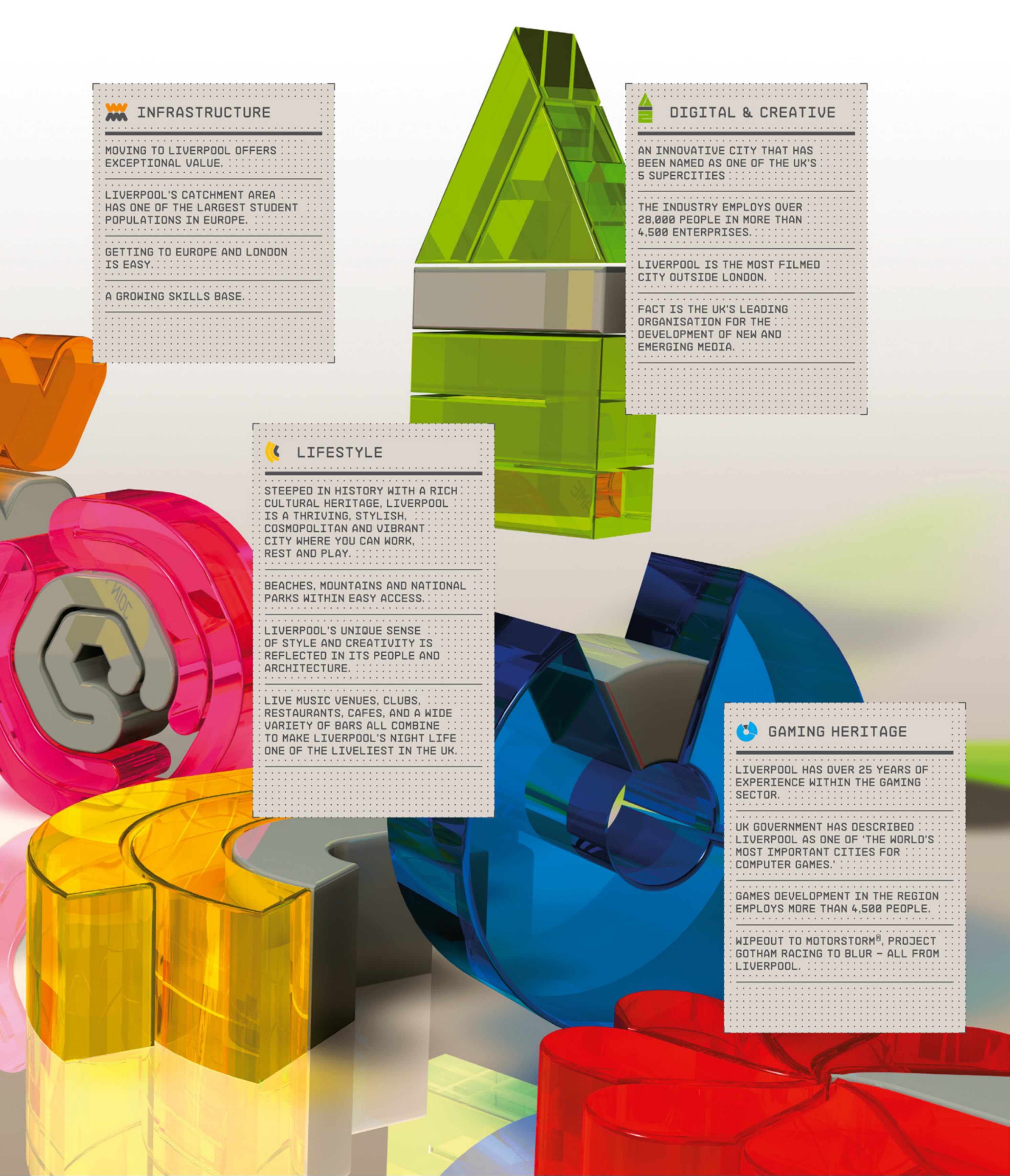




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LISTENING TO THE MERSEYBEAT

Appropriately, this roundtable of Liverpool developers is taking place in the conference room at Sony's Studio Liverpool offices. Most of the attending crowd have worked here at some point during their careers because, prior to the company being bought by Sony, the building was the home of Psygnosis – one of the most famous names in UK game publishing.

As you'd expect, there are attendees from Sony. **Mick Hocking**, group studio director, heads up Studio Liverpool, Evolution Studios and Bigbig Studios (based in Leamington Spa). **Graeme Ankers**, director of the internal concept group, and **Pete Smith**, executive producer at XDev Studio Europe, the team that takes care of signing, nurturing and bringing to market the games that are developed by independent developers and published by SCEE, are also present.

There are many other experienced people seated around the table – **Neil Thompson** used to work at Sony, before becoming studio art director at Bizarre Creations, while **Mike Clarke** is technical director of startup Playbox. **John Walsh** has worked in Liverpool game companies for most of his professional life. He's now studio head of brand-new Rebellion startup Redoubt. Rebellion Liverpool itself is represented by head of studio **Andy McCann**.

The support sector is present, too. **Stig Strand** is head of games recruitment specialist Amiqus, while **Neil Bradley** is the corporate development manager at regional investment body The Mersey Partnership.

What's the current mood of the Liverpool development scene?

Mick Hocking: There doesn't seem to be the proliferation of independents that there used to be. But I think we're returning to a phase in the industry, with the options in terms of digital downloads, where we're going to see that activity again.

Pete Smith: When the consoles launched, it took a big investment to get involved in those games, but now things such as PSN and PSP enable people to get into the industry with much lower barriers to entry. In external development, we're really keen on encouraging startups to get involved.

John Walsh: Liverpool has always had a strong development base and I think you're beginning to see that grow with the new routes to market. More generally, I think Liverpool should be shouting a lot more about the things we do. Not just games, but events like the European City of Culture in 2008, and all the investment that's followed on since. There are a lot of reasons to come to Liverpool or get back into the industry here if you left to go and work somewhere else.

Neil Thompson: I don't think Liverpool's got the recognition it deserves. If you look at the launch of PlayStation 3, there were three internally developed



A hidden gem in the UK development scene, Liverpool is home to large internal developers, sizeable established studios and plenty of fast-moving startups. So what characterises these companies, and are they reflecting the growing confidence of the revitalised city?

games and two of them were developed within 20 miles of this spot [*Formula One Championship Edition* and *MotorStorm*]. With Xbox, you had Bizarre Creations making *Project Gotham Racing*, which was a big game on the console. As a region, Liverpool doesn't get the recognition it deserves. We need more investment, especially in academia, to ensure we can continue this success and make sure there's a flow of people coming into the region and the industry.

MH: We don't market ourselves very well. Partly, I think that's because there's not a regional body that enables developers to get together and talk about the issues – recruitment, investment etc – and then market ourselves outwards. There have been attempts to set such organisations up, but they haven't been successful.

Stig Strand: You have to remember that when we had the M62 Network, we had companies such as Rage, Runecraft and Warthog in the region. Thinking back to 2000, as a recruiter it was very easy to move people around studios in the northwest because there was plenty of talent and opportunities. Unfortunately, when those companies went bust in quick succession, a lot of staff went overseas to the places that were recruiting aggressively in Canada and the US. Also, the southeast of England expanded really fast. I think things have improved a lot since then though. The companies around Liverpool are stable, and there are companies actively recruiting, just not in the numbers they were doing in the past.

JW: As someone starting up a development studio, I've got a strong business plan for growth over the next few years, and the quality of the companies in this area is really great to encourage people to the region. With the likes of Sony, Evolution and Bizarre Creations, there are big heavy hitters, and combined with smaller teams, I think it's generally positive. What we're missing is somewhere where those people who haven't worked at Psygnosis or Sony during their careers, and who know the local network, can meet up and we can all find out what's happening.

Graeme Ankers: I have the feeling the area's definitely getting stronger and we'll have more startups happening.

Michael Clarke: I hear new company names that I've not previously heard of fairly regularly.

PS: Don't you think it's mad, though, that the place you're most likely to meet a new startup from Warrington is GDC or E3?

JW: When I had my first startup, we did some outsourcing work for Bizarre Creations and the easiest thing was to meet them in a hotel in LA during E3. That's just about timing.

PS: In external development, we're constantly looking to meet new developers and it's often the case that you travel halfway around the world to meet someone who works a couple of hundred metres away from your office. I don't think any of the previous networks we had in the

region catered for that. They were much too social, which isn't a bad thing, but when I was at EA, we sponsored one event. Afterwards, we had a think about what we got out of it, and yes, we made a speech about recruitment and got some CVs from students, but that sort of return isn't going to encourage someone to sponsor an event. There needs to be more structure in these networks.

Can the existing regional investment bodies help?
Neil Bradley: Part of our role in promoting Liverpool is to encourage activity within the region. One thing we did in late 2009 was get the Develop game conference to Liverpool in the form of Develop North. It was only one day, but we're looking to grow it and get people to realise the good stuff that's going on here. Equally, if we need a body to voice your concerns, that's something we should look at setting up.
Andy McCann: It would have to be set up with people from within the industry, though, as in the past you've had people who don't know the industry trying to set these groups up, and that's one of the reasons it all falls apart.

North West Regional Development Agency grant, which pays 35 per cent of capital expenditure in terms of setup costs for jobs created over three years. In Montreal they offer 36 per cent. But if people don't know about these schemes in the UK, it's useless. I knew about it from previously having set up a studio here and dealing with the NWDA. If you're a startup and you're thinking about where to start your studio, the money's here in Liverpool.
PS: It's interesting, because when I go to industry events, I come across a lot of French and Scandinavians developers. You get some UK developers, but not that many, and you have less again from the northwest. These other countries are acting in a much more proactive way to encourage startups, because there are many more new companies being created. And with the right management, these will turn into the games studios of the future. I don't see a lot of those coming out of the UK.
JW: It's still the case that you get extra tax incentives for setting up a studio in Canada. They have much better options in terms of tax credits for people investing in high-risk games companies and being

Photography: **Atmosferik Photography**



"It's just a case of telling people what we're doing. Companies in Liverpool are making some of the biggest titles in the world"

NB: The public sector tends to be very good at telling the private sector what it needs rather than listening to what it says it needs. We need to listen to you guys and then work with you to make it happen.
MH: It'd be great to have a setup where the smaller developers can come to meet us to share ideas and we can help them get off the ground. What usually happens is those people are very creative but lack business skills and we can help with that. Because I do think this is the best area for game development in the UK. It's just a case of telling people what we're doing here. Companies in Liverpool are making some of the biggest titles in the world.
NB: When we're looking to encourage companies to come to Liverpool, it's important to focus on areas we have world-class talent in, and games is one of those. We need to be looking to market Liverpool as a games city. That's a brand we can build on going forward.
MH: It's a particularly good time at the moment with the BBC and ITV coming to Media City in Manchester. We need to be saying, the region isn't only creative for TV and film production, but for games too.
NT: It's important to stress games as a valid art form because it gets over this stereotype that games are bad for children. Throughout the country, I think there's a real need for the promotion of the industry as something that's healthy, both in terms of careers and how much money it brings into the economy.

Why start up a game studio in Liverpool?
JW: There are really good opportunities in terms of investment. We've just set up Redoubt and got our



able to offset that investment against other businesses if it goes wrong. We don't have anything like that in the UK. That's a big problem. It's a lack of government support, and it's a catch-22 because the government says: "You've done so well without it". But now we're losing out because developers in these other countries have access to these advances. I guess this is a different argument to local issues, but the UK government needs to be seriously lobbied. Although we've done well in spite of it, we should be able to prove that any investment breaks we received will be returned with interest.
MH: I completely agree, but that's what TIGA's been doing and it keeps running into a brick wall. The games business is now a global recruitment pool and we suffer from global competition. The fact is that in France and Canada, they have these very attractive tax breaks and crucially they're easy to get hold of too. You don't have to spend two years going through paperwork and jumping through hoops to get the funding. There is some funding available in this country but it's so hard to get hold of.
NB: The fund in the north west is called Grant for Business Investment, which is a national fund managed regionally through the NWDA. Liverpool currently receives one of the highest levels of assistance in the UK; which for SME's is up to 35 per cent, and up to 25 per cent for large companies of the total project costs when you're starting up. That's just one funding stream. Another one covers training costs, which will pay up to 60 per cent of staff training costs. These combine with other advantages,





such as cheaper housing and cost of living in the north west compared to other parts of the UK. I think it all adds up to make Liverpool an attractive proposition; certainly if anyone is thinking about starting up game development in the region.

What's the situation like in terms of getting commercial investment?
MC: It's a big issue. There are promises and promises, but getting that cheque at the end is a big challenge. For us at Playbox, it was all about timing really. We had the right presentation at the right time, and our investors were looking for new IP and we were lucky in that we have new IP. In terms of talking to publishers, it's as hard as it ever was, if not harder, especially after the recession. People are so careful about paying out money. Certainly for original IP it's harder now than it has ever been. There are a lot of new publishers who have sprung up and are focused on digital downloads but I don't think they add much to the deal. They're more like the old-school publishers where you come to them with a finished game and they'll distribute it. There's not a real amount of benefit for the small developer if you have to fund the game yourself, so in those situations you still have to go outside the industry to get investment.
JW: I disagree. We've found that even some of the big publishers have gaps in their release schedule because they've canned a lot of games. You need to be in the right place at the right time with the right IP, but in that situation, I think there's investment available, as long as your game is great.

Why do you think Liverpool's development scene has flourished while Manchester's has collapsed?
NT: It is strange. I guess it's because studios like Bizarre Creations set up in Liverpool because of Psygnosis and then stayed when it became Sony. In Manchester, you had Ocean, which became Infogrames and there was less of a development base when the publishers took over. Still, if you look back at the impact of the two big UK publishers, Psygnosis and Ocean, in studios around the world, you can find people who served out their apprenticeships at those two companies. The tendrils of the region run deep throughout the games industry.
AM: Regardless of whether companies are based in Manchester or Liverpool or Warrington, you have that catchment area for staff. I think it goes in cycles. There's just more development at this end of the M62 at the moment.
NT: It should definitely be considered as being more about the entire region rather than individual cities.
SS: When it comes to recruitment, if people want to work in the northwest, they're happy to work in Liverpool, Manchester, Runcorn, wherever. It's a 40-mile catchment area that people are prepared to commute within.
NB: Seven million people live within an hour's drive of Liverpool.

How has the wider culture of Liverpool changed?
JW: One of Liverpool's biggest exports used to be its people, because everyone moved away to get jobs. Now, though, we're keeping skilled people and there are a huge number of students too, which makes it a much better place in terms of recruiting across a range of different requirements. We still have the Harry Enfield jokes about scousers, but I think most people have started to realise it doesn't work like that anymore. We've moved on from the shellsuits. There's great nightlife here. There's cheap accommodation. It's the most filmed city in the UK outside London.
NB: During the Capital of Culture, we had clients from all over the world coming to Liverpool for the first time and they were astounded. They had this stereotype of Liverpool, but a lot of the UK clients were planning to come back for a holiday or shopping because they realised how much was going on. There are a lot of people who hadn't ever come to Liverpool, and seeing what was going on in terms of the regeneration of the city centre – with the Liverpool One retail and leisure complex and the docks – changed their perceptions.
MC: It was a massive thing for me. I lived in London for six years and when I came back it didn't seem like it had changed much. But 2008 was massive. I've met up with friends who I went to school with and who've moved away and since come back, and they're shocked by the place and how much it's changed. It's a really nice location to be living in, and spreading the word is great.
PS: What I always thought was funny was that ten years ago there were no decent hotels in Liverpool. There was only the Adelphi. That's completely

changed now and demonstrates the popularity of the city from a tourist and a business perspective.
AM: It feels like a bigger city now, even when you're walking around it.
JW: Another important thing is the transport links. It's two hours by train to London. You've got the KLM hub at the airport so you can directly check into your flight at Schiphol. Whether nationally or internationally, you can get to the city easily, and that makes things a hell of a lot easier for clients and for recruitment, when you can get there and back again in a day. And if you need to stay longer, there are plenty of great hotels, good restaurants and bars.
NT: That's good in terms of attracting people away from Brighton, but do you think it works internationally compared to Montreal or California, which is where the talent is heading to? Ubisoft Montreal is a studio with a couple of thousand talented people from all over the world. Can we say our development community is as attractive as that? Regardless of how great Liverpool is as a city – and I'm a Mancunian – the thing that really concerns me is the development community could be dying because of a lack of investment in academia. There is a dwindling talent pool of experienced people, who are just moving around the same studios. We're all perfect examples of that. And, to be honest, I don't think it's just a Liverpool thing. It's a UK thing.
PS: I think Liverpool is a very creative city in terms of its history in music and computer games. We need to be fostering this attitude otherwise people will go elsewhere. The area has always produced talented people but the question is, are they staying here? That's when you have a problem. We have to work harder to make sure we're retaining those people because you can go to any big developer anywhere in the world, and you'll find some scousers.

How do you think Liverpool competes in the global recruitment market, especially in terms of attracting new talent?
NT: Attracting people from the west coast of America is difficult. There's a salary gap that's difficult to overcome. There's the weather, and the required skill factor is getting greater. Games are fundamentally getting a lot more difficult to make. It's not like the mid-'90s where you could fill a studio with 150 people and make a couple of games with a lot of people doing grunt work. Now, with the level of the consoles, we're essentially a broadcast medium in terms of the quality of the image, so you need that quality of staff. People need the ability to have a vision at the highest level. They're not operators of software any longer, and if you're going to pay people well to work in your studio, they have to be the best possible people and that always takes time to find.
MC: As a small startup, some of our staff have been attracted to us because we're working on an original title. There aren't a lot of companies who are doing that at the moment and for a certain group of people, not working on a sequel or a franchise is exactly what they want.
NT: Personally, I think a lot of the issues we have in recruitment funnel down to the games courses we have in the country. They're fundamentally failing us as an industry because they attract people who want to work in games but who aren't creative. We should be going to the best courses to get the best people, not going to games courses.
SS: The best programmers come from computer science degrees, or maths or physics degrees. Those guys with first-class degrees get snapped up by other industries before they even think about a career in games.
JW: The problems are the games courses. Even if we decided tomorrow to change a degree course, it would take three years to influence the course in terms of getting graduates and then it would be three years out of date. Things move that fast in terms of technology and techniques, you're constantly fighting a losing battle.
MH: This is where the funding for training comes in. What would be ideal would be to hire computer science, maths or physics graduates and then train them up internally. The problem is that this costs a lot of time and money and when times are tight, you're thinking about everything you're spending. Getting access to regional funding would really help. We've been trying to chase it for a long time because it would help us bridge that gap so we can take in graduates and it would provide a bit of a buffer for those first 12 months.
JW: I don't think there's anyone around this table who would prefer a games graduate with a 2:1 over a fine art or physics graduate with a 2:1. You know it's going to be a lot quicker to teach them how to use the tools.
NT: The simple thing would be to make all games courses post graduate.
JW: We're also responsible as an industry for going into the universities and telling them that it isn't working, and trying to help them sort it out. Hopefully they'll listen to us.
AM: We have to remember that it's hard for the universities because they're getting students who want to do games but who have no real idea what the job entails. On the programming side, it's incredibly technical and it's only getting more complicated. But the universities can't turn the majority of their students away in the first year, because all the courses will close. For me, it makes more sense to get involved with the schools, so people get an idea earlier about the academic requirements games need.









MH: Yes. I think the problem is starting in school, because no one understands how games are actually made, so kids lose interest in maths and science because they don't relate them to computer games. If they were told that they could get a really good job in the games industry if they work hard and go on to do pure maths at university, then that might improve things. At the moment, that connection's just not being made.

NB: Later in the month, we're having a meeting where we're going to get industry and the local universities in the same room and get them to discuss what they want from each other, because at the moment, they don't seem to talking the same language. We need to get the dialogue going.

MC: We took on three students from Liverpool John Moores' placement scheme last year. Obviously they were very raw so I started them on scripting. But it became apparent they were fairly good, so I moved them into coding, and by the end of the year, the difference compared to when they arrived… you couldn't relate the two.

MH: There's no substitute for sitting next to someone who knows what they're doing.

AM: I don't understand why games courses can't be more aligned with what we need. There's obviously some discrepancy in terms of what the academics think should be part of a games course.

MH: At Sony, we'd prefer them to have really solid software engineering skills.

> "If money's provided, industry can innovate at a pace no one else can. Once a few companies create success, everyone else will be drawn in, but you've got to provide the funding"

NT: It goes back to computer science versus games courses. I've had CVs from graduates with a science background, they get taught about algorithms and how to programme and then it gets applied to games. With games courses, they get taught how to make games and there's a lot of fundamental coding knowledge that's missing.

MH: There is some hope, though. Skillset is doing some good work and the courses it accredits are good. We need that high standard. Sony's also just hired someone full-time to handle our academic partnerships – specifically to get us working better with academia, making links with the universities, running competitions – and to foster this relationship and get it going. But I think that would be even better if we had a group in the northwest where we could all chip in.

If you could change one thing about Liverpool that would improve the environment for games, what would it be?

AM: A second bridge over the Mersey.

MH: To get a good, active northwest group meeting together and encouraging new startups. That would be a real major benefit for all of us.

NB: It's definitely about Liverpool and Manchester working together for the good of the region, because the cities are only 30 miles apart and infighting doesn't do anyone any good.

GA: We need to see the region as a whole, because the different cities benefit from the resources that come together in the area. This will come from a mixture of the creativity we've got and the products we release.

MH: There definitely needs to be something that joins Liverpool and Manchester together rather than them competing. And funding for training. If money is provided, industry can innovate at a pace no one else can, certainly much faster than academia. Once a few companies create success, everyone else will be drawn in, but you've got to provide funding.

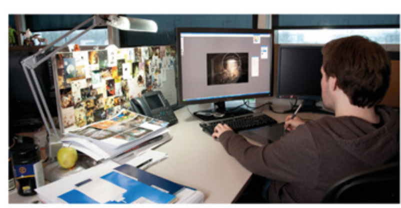
JW: Also, when people read this article, they'll see we've got one of the largest format holders in the world, an internal studio from the largest publisher in the world, two studios from the largest independent developer in Europe, and some startups – all in the Liverpool area. That's really impressive, and I think it's only going to get bigger and better.

STUDIO LIVERPOOL

Sony's internal studio is adapting to market conditions, shifting to nimbler, smaller projects

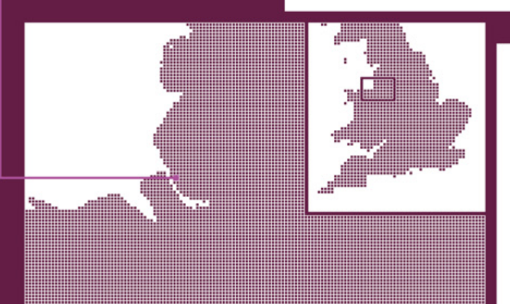
STUDIO Liverpool

- **NAME:** Studio Liverpool
- **LOCATION:** Liverpool
- **FOUNDED:** 1984
- **EMPLOYEES:** 90
- **URL:** www.worldwidestudios.net/liverpool
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Wipeout* series, *Colony Wars*, *Formula One* series




Sony's sharing staff, ideas and cultures across three of its sites – Studio Liverpool, Evolution and Bigbig – to maximise creativity and productivity, and to develop smaller games in shorter timescales. Its XDev Studio Europe is based in the same Wavertree Campus facility



Interview: Mick Hocking & Graeme Ankers

Mick Hocking – Group studio director
Graeme Ankers – Director of internal concept group

Sony's Studio Liverpool has dominated the local development scene since it was formed as publisher Psygnosis in 1984. Acquired by Sony in 1993, it's launched some of PlayStation's biggest brands including *Wipeout*, as well as working on licences such as *Formula One*. Now part of Sony's North West Studio Group, with Evolution and Bigbig, recent restructuring has prepared it to flourish in the fast-moving world of making smaller games, quicker.

What does a group studio director do?
Mick Hocking: When Sony bought Evolution, they wanted me to take over the running of Liverpool studio to encourage a more independent culture and bring some of the enthusiasm we had in Evolution. Studio Liverpool has a history of producing high quality games, delivered on time, but we knew we couldn't just rely on the old licences and franchises to take the studio forwards. Being part of the Studio Group means we can cross-pollinate the best of the culture between studios. In particular, we share staff across projects at Liverpool and Evolution.

How does this work?
MH: One example is the internal concept group that Graeme runs. It operates across the three sites, and helps glue them together. We do a lot of brainstorming, whether that's around a new game or an aspect of a current game we're stuck on.



What's the purpose of the group?
Graeme Ankers: I'm looking at the opportunities in terms of projects one to two years in the future. We know the general direction Mick wants us to move in, and within that we create a very large volume of ideas. Last year, we came up with around 980. Every four months, we have a meeting with the senior management and pitch them our top ten games. Two or three might get put into pre-production by a small group who will then work up that concept for a couple of months until the game is either greenlit or rejected.

How do you generate the ideas?
GA: We get people from different cultures and specialisms working together. Usually we run the sessions tightly, over an hour with about six people. You need some rules but it's also about letting people be active, so there's lots of writing on Post-it notes. On occasion, we get other Sony studios involved. The Japanese come up with some really interesting ideas.

How does Sony interact with local universities?
MH: 2010 is going to be our biggest year in terms of interfacing with universities both in the North West and across Europe. We've just hired a full-time Academic Partnership Manager to help us communicate with universities, as well as schools. We're always interviewing graduates but we're limited in terms of how many we can take on, although because Sony Liverpool also does the quality assurance for PAL PlayStation, that's a great entry point into the industry. We're now offering an apprenticeships to train people to move from QA into development.



Wipeout HD on PS3 – the eighth title in the series – and *MotorStorm: Arctic Edge* on PSP both sit under the Studio Liverpool umbrella





EVOLUTION STUDIOS

One of the UK's most successful studios is retaining its driving ambition as part of Sony

- **NAME:** Evolution Studios
- **LOCATION:** Runcorn
- **FOUNDED:** 1999
- **EMPLOYEES:** 110
- **URL:** www.evos.net
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *World Rally Championship* series, *MotorStorm*, *MotorStorm: Pacific Rift*




MotorStorm: Pacific Rift **followed the original *MotorStorm*, one of the key PlayStation 3 launch titles**



Interview: Mick Hocking

Group studio director

Formed by Ian Hetherington, Martin Kenwright, **Mick Hocking** and half a dozen staff from flight-sim specialist Digital Image Design in 1999, Evolution Studios made its name with the million-selling *World Rally Championship* on PS2 in 2001. In the next six years, it released another four *WRC* games, selling more than 5.5 million units. In September 2007, together with Leamington Spa-based sister studio Bigbig, it was bought by SCEE. Now part of the North West Studio Group with Sony Liverpool, all three are now run by Hocking.

Why Runcorn?
This is where DID was founded and the North West has always been great for games companies. There's some long-established studios, which means the region has a large pool of talented and experienced people. Of course, we recruit from everywhere and we're always looking for new ideas and for people who can bring new thinking to the studios.

How did you become an off-road specialist?
We were thinking what we could do that didn't have anything to do with flight sims, which is what we had previously been working on. We made a demo with six Mitsubishi Evos on a rally track. Sony was looking at the *WRC* licence at the time and eventually the two came together. We ended up bringing a lot of the skills we had learned from flight sims over to the rally games, like large draw distances, procedurally generated environments, and the physics engine.

What was the inspiration for *MotorStorm*?
We wanted to take the coolest collection of off-road vehicles, put them all in the most beautiful and stunning environments, and then have them race in the most brutal and intense fashion, with all the action centred around the player. But when we showed our first PS3 demo to Sony's management, we were told it was the worst presentation they'd seen! That certainly woke us up. We worked like maniacs to really improve the game and push the PS3 to the limits to prove we were the strongest next-gen title on the platform. Nearly four million sales later I think we achieved our aim with the first *MotorStorm*.

Has becoming part of Sony changed Evolution?
It's been fairly straightforward. Sony is very good at preserving the identity of the developers it buys. Evolution's always had a culture of us against the world, of working and playing hard – and we still do, maybe not quite to the same extent as when we were independent but that was quite exceptional.

What advantages does it bring?
As an independent, Evolution used to get by with what was needed to get the games complete, it was perhaps immature in terms of its processes. With Sony's backing, we've matured. You don't realise how much you're running on a shoestring until you come into an organisation with the vast resources of Sony. We're not patching our network every couple of days or using old PCs as web servers any more. We have a solid infrastructure which makes it easier to make great games. Also, as an independent you can get insular, whereas as part of Sony we have a free and productive exchange of information and ideas with other Sony studios around the world.




Evolution's WRC-licensed games were enormous successes and paved the way for more experimental racing experiences

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Studio profile



REBELLION LIVERPOOL

Working as part of the UK's largest indie developer means that life is never dull

- **NAME:** Rebellion Liverpool
- **LOCATION:** Runcorn
- **FOUNDED:** 2006
- **EMPLOYEES:** 32
- **URL:** www.rebellion.co.uk
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Black Hawk Down: Team Sabre, The Simpsons, Star Wars Battlefront: Renegade Squadron, Call Of Duty: World At War Final Fronts*





Brothers Jason and Chris Kingsley founded Rebellion in 1992, but the studio network established a base in Liverpool in 2006





Rebellion Liverpool's current schedule includes work on *Aliens Vs Predator* for Sega



Interview: Andy McCann

Head of studio

The genealogy of Rebellion Liverpool reads like a potted history of UK development. It can trace its roots back to 1990s flight sim specialist Rowan Software, which was acquired by publisher Empire Interactive in 2000. Renamed Strangelite, the studio worked on the PC ports of *Crazy Taxi* and *Virtua Tennis*, before being bought by Oxford developer Rebellion in 2006 when Empire ditched its internal teams. Since then, Rebellion Liverpool has worked on solo projects as well as helping out Rebellion's other studios.

So, what's it like being one of the original Rowan employees?
Just as long as I don't have to go back to making flight sims, it's fine. Actually, there are three of us still around from those days, including our original IT guy. Now, however, we have a mix of experienced developers and fresh talent, which works out very well. We're particularly keen on graduates who can show us their project work and that they've worked in teams; it's what game development is all about.

What's the working environment like?
There's a nice feeling to the place. We try to keep it as casual as possible and ensure people enjoy their work. We've had people leave for pastures new and then come back because they've not enjoyed working in other offices. To some degree it's serious stuff, and you have to work hard, but it's also about making games. If people are enjoying the game they're working on, I'm happy.

How does your office fit into the wider Rebellion setup?
We share the same core Asura technology, which is run out of the main Oxford studio, and each site works to help out the others. Sometimes we're working for the other locations; sometimes we're the lead location and using staff elsewhere. It took a bit of time to get used to this cross-site management, but it works well in terms of being able to efficiently move resources to where they're needed.

Does that organisational approach mean you get to work on a lot of titles?
Absolutely. A lot of the games we've developed here are first-person shooters, such as *Final Fronts*, the PS2 version of *Call Of Duty: World At War*, but we're flexible enough to be able to do anything. We've worked on games such as *The Simpsons* and *Harry Potter* as well. Most recently though, we've been working on parts of *Aliens Vs Predator*. It means we're always busy and people get a lot of experience. In 2008, some of our staff worked on three games, which is great for their CVs.

What are your plans for 2010 in terms of projects and competing in an evolving market?
We can't say in terms of work-for-hire projects, but we're also working on prototyping original IP and looking at opportunities in terms of distribution options, such as downloadable content, XBLA and Steam. It gives us so much more flexibility as developers and it's better for gamers too.



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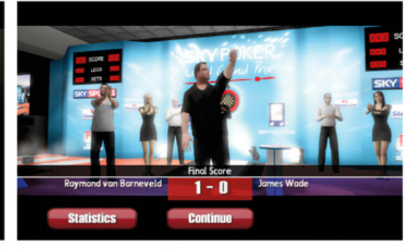


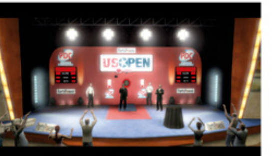
REDOUBT

Launching its second studio in the region, this time Rebellion's going kid-friendly

- **NAME:** Redoubt
- **LOCATION:** Liverpool
- **FOUNDED:** 2009
- **EMPLOYEES:** Six
- **URL:** www.rebellion.co.uk
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Lazytown, PDC Word Championship Darts 2009*







***PDC Word Championship Darts 2009* on Wii was developed with input from Phil 'The Power' Taylor and features 18 professional players. As you'd expect, it makes use of the Remote to simulate the action of launching a dart**







Interview: John Walsh

Studio head

The newest recruit to the Liverpool gaming scene, Redoubt – a wholly owned subsidiary of Rebellion – is currently only half-a-dozen staff strong but it has big plans for the future. In contrast to Rebellion's hobbyist-focused reputation, gained by creating titles such as *Star Wars Battlefront: Renegade Squadron* and *Rogue Trooper*, Redoubt will be focusing more on massmarket games, with a title based on the children's TV show LazyTown coming to all platforms in Q4 2010. In addition, the team is also working on DS games, which marks the first occasion a Rebellion studio has developed for the platform.

Why has Rebellion set up Redoubt?
I was working at Rebellion's Derby studio and one of the issues that came up with [Rebellion owners] Jason and Chris Kingsley was that they were turning away work on some platforms while some staff didn't want to work on more massmarket games. With my business background I saw an opportunity, so I put a case to them to set up a new studio. It all came together quite quickly last year.

Why set up here, specifically?
Well, I'm from this part of the world and it's got a great heritage in games so there's a great talent base, as well as good students. Also, working with The Mersey Partnership, we've been able to receive funding via the Grant for Business Investment scheme. This covers up to 35 per cent of our staff costs for the first three years of the studio, so that substantially lowers the risks involved when you're starting up a whole new studio.

What are you looking for from your team?
We're as keen as any startup but we have the backing of Rebellion so we're secure too. And our size means people can have a voice rather than being a cog in the machine. For me, what makes a good game is a good team, which means good people. I'm focused on making sure we have the right people, which mean people with a strong work ethic and who understand games.

What's the story behind your LazyTown project?
It's a huge kids' TV show that's based around teaching children about healthy eating and exercise. It was created in Iceland, but is broadcast in over 100 countries and the BBC has just commissioned a third series, so the timing's great to make a game on it. We're working closely with the production company on the game, which is based on kids doing physical exercises, and they're handling the storyline and making broadcast-quality cutscenes for us.

Which platforms are you focused on?
We're going to be releasing on everything, but obviously focusing on Wii because of the motion gameplay. We'll be doing Natal and PlayStation motion controller versions too. More generally at Redoubt, we're working on other titles, notably strategy games for DS, which will be a first for Rebellion in terms of supporting that platform.



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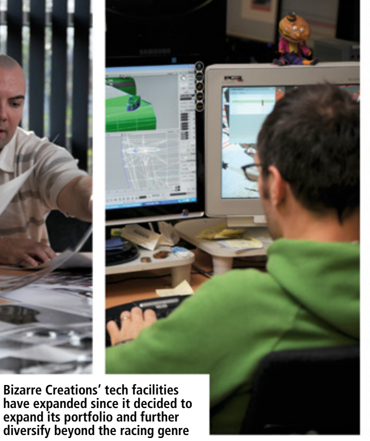


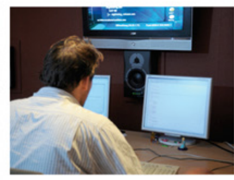
BIZARRE CREATIONS

Now a part of Activision, the Project Gotham team is gearing up to release Blur and a Bond adventure

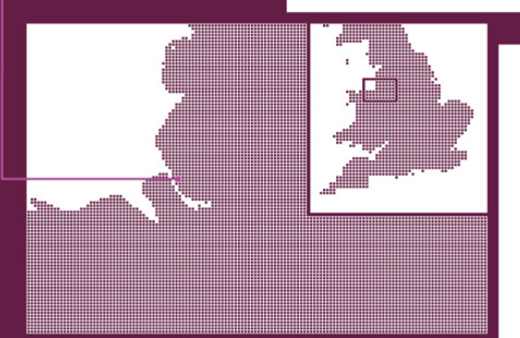


- **NAME:** Bizarre Creations
- **LOCATION:** Liverpool
- **FOUNDED:** 1994
- **EMPLOYEES:** 200
- **URL:** www.bizarrecreations.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Formula 1, Metropolis Street Racer, Project Gotham Racing* (1-4), *Geometry Wars, The Club*




Bizarre Creations' tech facilities have expanded since it decided to expand its portfolio and further diversify beyond the racing genre





Interview: Brian Woodhouse

Studio director

A local company that initially flourished thanks to the presence of Liverpool powerhouse Psygnosis, Bizarre Creations has since blossomed into one of the world's best racing studios thanks to the success of the *Project Gotham Racing* games. Bought by Activision in 2007, it's now also building on its action credentials with a James Bond-licensed game due later in 2010, while the highly anticipated, vehicular combat-based *Blur* should kickstart another racing franchise.

How would you characterise Bizarre Creations?
We like to make games and not shout about ourselves. We're building world-class games here, and it takes a large team to do it, so we don't have space for big egos. Some studios find success with a kingpin game director, but we're much more team oriented. We don't have rockstars. I think that sort of self-promotion is distracting. You can have the best PR machine but if your game comes out and flops, everyone looks like an idiot.

What's the working environment like?
I'd say it's fairly relaxed, with the understanding that people need to work hard. You have to trust your staff to be interested in the game they're making and our people are very motivated. We're flexible in terms of start and finish times, and we pay overtime.

How is your relationship with Activision?
Activision is very supportive of us. Basically it's hands-off until we need something. Activision firmly believes in the independent studio model, so doesn't want to come in and dictate terms. We stand on our own two feet, operating as a separate business. But if we need more time or resources, Activision is helpful. They understand implicitly that quality really matters.

How is the company structured?
The headcount is split into around 70 people on each of the two game teams, 20 people for support, admin and testing, and a core technology team of about 40. We have on-team programmers too, but our core technology is used by both games teams. We've always steered away from being dependent on external game engines. The technology is modular enough so we can share pieces but flexible enough that it splits into two separate engines – one for racing and one for action.

What do you look for in new staff?
We're open in the sense we don't a policy about requiring a degree or Ph.D. As long as you can prove your ability and have a passion for games, we're interested. We're very careful about who we hire, though. Our interview process is lengthy so by the time we make someone an offer, we're 99 per cent sure it's going to work out. We don't take many chances, which also means we give people the level of support they need to succeed. It's a crime to hire someone and put them in a corner.



The Club (above) wasn't a success for the studio, but the experience was valuable in the context of its upcoming game based on the exploits of James Bond

create something original

Remember when you were just starting out in the games industry, and work was all about fun?
Remember that feeling of pride when you had an idea that pushed the boundaries?
When you were part of a team of great people who made original, creative things happen?
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playbox

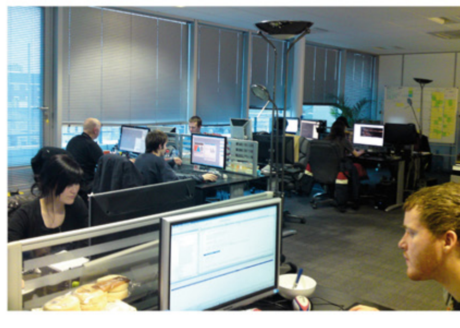
PLAYBOX

From mobile and DS to PS3 and 360, this boutique studio is scaling up its operations

- **NAME:** Playbox
- **LOCATION:** Liverpool
- **FOUNDED:** 2005
- **EMPLOYEES:** 23
- **URL:** www.playboxgames.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Football Manager Quiz, Imagine Beauty Stylist, Bang Bang Racing*

Playbox was established with a view of creating games suitable for all age ranges, and extensive focus testing helps it to shape the direction of its productions







MD



Marketing manager



Interview: Gary Nichols & Susan Campbell

Despite being active for five years, Playbox is one of Liverpool's more hidden developers. But having worked on a number of portable titles for the likes of Sega and Ubisoft, not to mention making inroads in the world of online Flash games, the studio is stepping up activity with its forthcoming console debut, *Bang Bang Racing*. This will bring the world of *Micro Machines*-style racing into the present, and Playbox has plenty of plans in terms of where it could take this style of game in future.

What's it been like to set up Playbox?
Gary Nichols: It's definitely been the hardest thing I've ever done, but when I was working in PR at Psygnosis I knew game development was what I wanted to do. Choosing to start up in 2005 wasn't the best time, of course, and it took a lot of effort to get the required funding and sign our first contract, but eventually it's worked out.

How has the company evolved since 2005?
GN: We did some small, niche titles to get started. Our first game was *Football Manager Quiz* for Sega. We did a skill-for-prizes pub version and then did a mobile game, and slowly built up the company from there, moving on to PlayStation 2, PSP and PC games. We heard about Wii fairly early on and decided we would focus on it, and following a visit to Nintendo in Japan, we ended up being one of the first companies in the North West to get developer status. We also expanded to DS, most recently developing *Imagine Beauty Stylist* for Ubisoft.

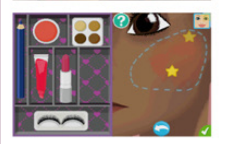
What can you tell us about your current game?
GN: *Bang Bang Racing* originally started as a Wii product with a Nintendo art style, but since then market conditions and some early focus testing have led us to switch to PS3 and Xbox 360. We've been getting very good feedback from potential publishers and are in the process of negotiating a deal. It could be either a retail or download product.

Is focus testing a big part of your philosophy?
Susan Campbell: It was something I did when I was working at Sony. I think it helps our relationship with publishers because they can see we're professional in our approach, but more importantly helps us make a game people want to buy, as opposed to developing products in an isolated 'bubble'. We worked with three age groups: seven- and eight-year-old boys and girls; 14- and 15-year-old boys; and a group of engineering students. It helped us understand the importance of controls and multiplayer, how people play and who they play with. It's something we plan to do more of, especially in terms of the controls.

How have you found the recruitment process?
GN: We quickly built up an experienced team of about 12 people, who had worked at companies such as Sony and Rage, followed by some more staff from Juiced. Since then, we've recruited at a more junior level and got good graduates from the likes of Abertay and Bolton universities. Now we're looking out for more experienced people who will fit in with our team.









The studio's previous releases include *Imagine Beauty Stylist* and *Football Manager Quiz*; console game *Bang Bang Racing* will follow

Sometimes everything isn't as it seems. You see things other people don't see. There's opportunity everywhere you look. We get it. You're passionate about gaming. As we're recruiters specialising in the video games industry, you'll soon discover that gaming is our passion too.

Some people are happy to sit around waiting for their next career opportunity, but often they're waiting a long time. Because some of the top roles are never even advertised.

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So no matter what stage you're at in your career or what your discipline is, don't just sit there. Why not talk to us about where we can take you next? Email us at **games.team@amiqus.com** or visit **amiqus.com/games**



We know your world

Gaming. It gets to you.



AMIQUS GAMES

With ten years' experience in the sector, Amiqus has built an enviable reputation in recruitment

- **NAME:** Amiqus
- **LOCATION:** Warrington, Cheshire
- **FOUNDED:** 2000
- **EMPLOYEES:** 26
- **URL:** www.amiqus.com/games
- **SAMPLE CLIENTS:** SCEE, Bizarre Creations, Codemasters, Lionhead, Microsoft, EA





Amiqus doesn't create games, but you may have seen its ads featuring characters riffing on familiar themes (left)



Interview: Stig Strand

Head of games recruitment



Established as a specialist recruitment consultancy ten years ago, Amiqus has since expanded from its North West base to cover recruitment for the whole of the UK market and overseas. It's an active member of APSCo, the trade body for the professional recruitment sector, and won the Develop award for Industry Excellence in the recruitment category in 2009.

How does a company like Amiqus work?
Simply put, we work with individuals who are looking to develop their career in the games industry, and with games companies who are looking to fill vacancies. Currently we're actively working with around a third of development studio's in the UK.

How do your methods compare to others?
Our approach is different from other companies. We build long-term relationships with candidates and clients. For candidates, it's all about working with them to choose the opportunities and positions which are best suited for their requirements and career development. Working with Amiqus is like having an agent, who can provide you with specific advice over a number of years. Some of the candidates we'll place in jobs this year will have been with us for five or six years. For clients, it's knowing whether someone will fit into their orking environment. It's not about filling empty desks with the nearest available body.

Do you focus solely on the North West?
No, we work with companies all over the UK and Europe. We set up our games division focusing on the companies in the North West but expanded quickly. Since 2003, we've been working with clients in the midlands, North West and South East including Codemasters, Ubisoft, EA and Lionhead. We still have excellent links with companies based in Liverpool.

What's the current recruitment situation like?
Obviously it's been slower over the past year, but we're seeing things get better, especially in the north west. Companies such as Bizarre Creations, TT Fusion and Evolution have been expanding, while a range of smaller studios such as Redoubt are being established too. It's now the best it's been for a couple of years.

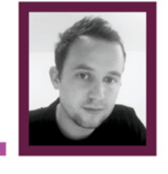
Do you work with graduates?
Advising graduates is one of the most satisfying parts of our job and it's definitely an area the industry needs to develop further. The issue is most graduates need additional training in order to be able to hit the ground running, in terms of being effective team members and being able to add immediate value to an employer. Therefore, we generally recommend that graduates gain a couple of years' commercial experience before looking for games jobs.

Which roles offer the most opportunities?
Experienced programmers are always in demand, especially for specialised roles in graphics, physics and networking. The scale of art assets required in games also means there's a strong demand for artists, although the entry-level jobs tend to be focused with outsourcing companies. There's also been an explosion in casual games development, which provides different design role opportunities.

milkytea™

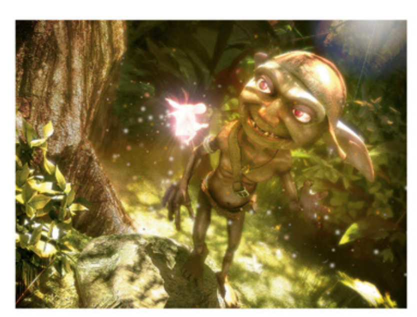
MILKY TEA

Mixing creative and technical services, this agency covers every artistic base



Interview: Jonathan Holmes
MD

True to its name, design agency Milky Tea was established over a good English cuppa and in the past five years has expanded until it covers everything from illustrations and visualisations to concept art, animation and visual effects. Indeed, it's even branching out into games, winning a spot on the PSN-based Get In The Game prototype program run by Sony and North West Vision and Media.



Milky Tea has produced some high-quality design and CGI resources for a number of big UK brands, including Lloyds TSB and the BBC

What's the background behind the agency?
Milky Tea was founded by myself and another designer, who had a real passion for 3D and CGI. Initially, the studio was set up as a 3D illustration and animation resource for the advertising and design industry. We began providing high-end art resources and creative concept development services for high-profile brands such as Lloyds TSB and BBC. Due to the success in these sectors, we found television production and game development studios approaching us too. I'd like to think we are now known as much for our creative vision and for inspiring people as delivering high-end artwork.

Why did you set up in Liverpool?
After having a couple of jobs in the design and 3D industry in the North West region, I became aware of the wealth of creative resources we have in this city, and although we do work regularly with large agencies in London and the Middle East, we also try and make the most of the talent and creative opportunities on our doorstep. It's also absolutely great to be sharing this city with the likes of Sony and Bizarre Creations. They help Liverpool keep its place on the creative map.

What standout projects have you worked on?
We focus our time on web-based experiences that develop and evolve through a narrative. The progression of technology has allowed us to get our teeth into some exciting projects – we worked with Liverpool production company Lime Pictures in 2009 on a project for the BBC. We provided artwork and design services for an online game that went alongside live-action series The Well.

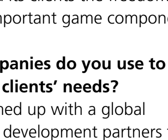
- **NAME:** Milky Tea
- **LOCATION:** Liverpool
- **FOUNDED:** 2005
- **EMPLOYEES:** 9
- **URL:** www.milkytea.com
- **SAMPLE CLIENTS:** Lloyds TSB, BBC, Renault, Lime Pictures, Liverpool Vision, GCHQ, NPower

Studio profile

catalyst

CATALYST OUTSOURCING

This production service company provides a full range of services via global partners



Interview: Ivan Davies
Production director

Headed up by a North West gaming veteran who's worked for the likes of Infogrames, Warthog and Sony, Catalyst has hit the ground running, managing outsourcing services to some of the highest-profile games to be released in 2010 (although it can't talk about them quite yet). It ensures its flexibility and scope of provided services by working with a range of outsourcing partners.



Catalyst is based in the offices of Liverpool International Business Park, where it works on a number of projects wrapped in secrecy

Why did you set up Catalyst?
Catalyst was created to utilise the varying skills and extensive knowledge of its management; a team with over 50 years of industry experience. We identified that more and more developers and publishers were using outsourcing as a means to combat rising development costs, but they were struggling to get the best out of this approach. Using Catalyst, teams can keep costs under tight control and ensure the delivery of triple-A quality. And we've been very lucky to work with some of the biggest publishers and most creative development teams.

What are your areas of expertise?
Reliable managed quality. Catalyst offers a complete range of production services from the creation of art assets to the full project management of a game, and our focus towards outsourcing is one of preventive solutions along the lifecycle of our outsourcing process. By overseeing and managing the whole process, Catalyst has allowed its clients the freedom to focus on important game components.

What companies do you use to fulfil your clients' needs?
We've teamed up with a global network of development partners to provide a first-class service to the games industry. Our partners, including companies such as Pearl Digital, Massive Black, Virtuos Games, XPEC and Realtime:UK, are based in China, Vietnam, India, the US, Eastern Europe, Canada and across the UK.

Why did you set up here?
Liverpool is our home town and has a long history of videogame development and publishing. We decided to set up here to keep this tradition going.



- **NAME:** Catalyst Outsourcing
- **LOCATION:** Liverpool
- **FOUNDED:** 2008
- **EMPLOYEES:** 3
- **URL:** www.catalystos.com
- **SAMPLE CLIENTS:** Bethesda Softworks, Bizarre Creations, Ubisoft



RENDER NATION

When it comes to art-focused processing power, this facility might be able to help…

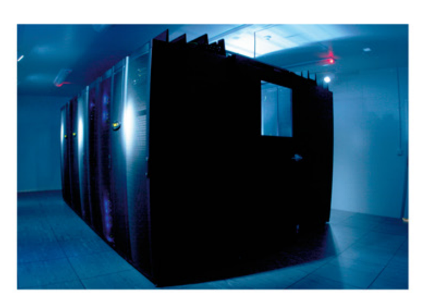




Interview: James Mooney

MD

Boasting 2,200GHz of rendering power spread across 220 Intel Xeon processors, Render Nation has plenty of grunt when it comes to enabling its clients to generate complex, high-resolution artwork and movies. One of the largest remote renderfarms in Europe, it balances this scale with a personal approach that works hand in hand with production workflows to ensure that the most demanding of deadlines can be met.



Render Nation's renderfarm looks appropriately sci-fi, and is naturally situated in a strictly temperature-controlled room

How did Render Nation start up?
I was managing an academic high-performance computing cluster in Liverpool, and had been helping some local creative companies with their rendering requirements. It didn't take long to realise that working in the creative industry was much more fun than IT, and there was a need for a professional remote rendering service.

Does your location matter?
From a client perspective, location doesn't matter; we provide services to an international client base of games, film, TV and visualisation companies located across every continent and time zone. That said, we have excellent relationships with nearly every creative company locally and enjoy meeting clients in person. There's a growing creative talent base in Liverpool and the North West, so it's fantastic to be at the epicentre.

What do you think distinguishes Render Nation?
Unlike other remote renderfarms, we don't hide behind faceless web interfaces. We become part of the team and share in the pain our clients go through to deliver projects on time, even if it means working crazy hours through the night and weekends. We've invested heavily in the latest technologies and infrastructure to become one of the fastest in Europe.

Can you talk about any projects you've been involved with?
We recently rendered a trailer created by Realtime:UK for *Napoleon: Total War* by Sega. As usual we were up against some tight deadlines, but the finished product is amazing. We're also working with River Media in Liverpool to deliver a stereoscopic 3D movie to be shown at the Liverpool Pavilion at the Shanghai Expo.



- **NAME:** Render Nation
- **LOCATION:** Liverpool
- **FOUNDED:** 2005
- **EMPLOYEES:** 5
- **URL:** www.rendernation.com
- **SAMPLE CLIENTS:** Realtime:UK, Riva Digital, NoEmotion, Uniform, Evolve, River Media



CITRUS SUITE

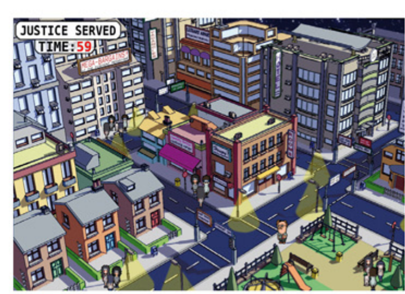
A cog in the dev machine, this startup is beginning small and looking to do it all



Interview: Chris Morland

Development director

There are now plenty of opportunities to set up successful companies within the gaps created over the past decade, as traditional game development has fragmented. Citrus Suite is one of the new breed of startups, providing outsourcing art and development services to the big boys in order to build up its business and expertise, while also looking to develop its own digital fun.



Citrus Suite offers specialism in just about every aspect of game design, from scriptwriting, concept illustration and storyboards, to 3D modelling, textures, animation rigging and even motion capture

What's the background to Citrus Suite as a company?
Citrus Suite was founded with the intention of offering game development services and ultimately producing our own original games for digital distribution. I've previously worked at game development studios and an art production house, and believed there was the potential to put together a relatively small team and supplement this core with external talent when the project required it. I'm always keen to explore new opportunities and engage in collaborations, and at this stage in our development we're pretty flexible.

What are your areas of expertise?
We specialise in the production of in-game art assets and believe we can carve out a niche producing our own IP over the coming years. Our code, art and design leads have over 30 years' experience in the industry, and as individuals we've worked on over 20 titles published by the likes of Sony, Microsoft, Codemasters, and Disney.

Why did you choose Liverpool?
There is a great cluster of companies here and a history of development. The local talent pool has often allowed us to ramp up to 20-plus staff. There's also a good network of agencies in the region, such as North West Vision and Media, The Mersey Partnership and Focus Innovation, who have assisted us.

What sort of contact do you have with the local game industry?
Most of our outsourcing work has come from outside the region, so it's nice when we cross paths with companies from the local area. We know a lot of guys at Redoubt, Playbox, Onteca and Magenta Software pretty well.



- **NAME:** Citrus Suite
- **LOCATION:** Liverpool
- **FOUNDED:** 2008
- **EMPLOYEES:** 5
- **URL:** www.citrussuite.com
- **SAMPLE CLIENTS:** Available on request

liverpool JMU

Study for a **games degree** with added **WoW**® factor at **LJMU**

Liverpool John Moores University has successfully delivered computer games degrees for almost a decade. Our degree courses offer a unique mix of theory, practical application and industry-leading World of Work (WoW) skills in a programme supported by local and national organisations. Our graduates can be found in studios all over the world – from North America to India and the Far East.

Liverpool John Moores University

The School of Computing and Mathematical Sciences at LJMU delivers high quality games tuition. Home to around 1000 full and part-time students we operate seven state-of-the-art computing laboratories with a dedicated team of academics and technical support staff. A thriving research environment exists in which 50% of our research output is rated as internationally significant or world-leading in a recent assessment (RAE 2008).



Our games courses are supported by a number of dedicated development laboratories. These provide students with access to the latest PCs, consoles, dev kits and SDKs for game development. With Nintendo developer status, the School of Computing and Mathematical Sciences can offer students real up-to-date experience and our play testing facilities for PS3, PC, Xbox 360, Wii and PS2, means that students can get exposed to a wide range of technologies. Our courses provide a **sandwich year spent working in the games industry**, ensuring that our students get highly valuable experience in the skills that matter to developers and ultimately making them more employable upon graduation.

// COURSES OFFERED

+ Computer Games Technology

BSc (Hons), 4 year full-time sandwich
MSc, 1 year full-time, 2 years part-time

This course is suited to those who seek to become game software developers. Topics studied on this course include programming and problem solving in C++, 2D and 3D graphics using DirectX and OpenGL, Artificial Intelligence, linear algebra and matrix operations and console development. Assessment is geared towards helping students develop a practical portfolio of work and both individual and group tasks are set to reflect real-world problems.

+ Computer Animation & Visualisation

BSc (Hons), 4 years full-time sandwich
MSc, 1 year full-time, 2 years part-time

This course is suited to those students who would like to pursue a technical yet creative and design-led career in games. Topics studied on this course include 3D modelling, texturing and lighting, animation techniques, visualisation tools, computer graphics technologies, user interface design and advanced interaction technologies.

+ Other Courses

Computer Studies, BSc (Hons)
Computer Forensics, BSc (Hons), MSc
Software Engineering, BSc (Hons)
Information Systems, BSc (Hons)
Information Technology and Multimedia Computing, BSc (Hons)
Business Mathematics, BSc (Hons)
Mathematics, Statistics and Computing, BSc (Hons)
Computing and Information Systems, MSc
Web Computing, MSc
Computer Network Security, MSc
Wireless and Mobile Computing, MSc

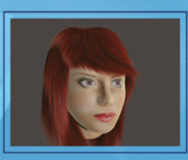
[CONTACT] School of Computing and Mathematical Sciences, Liverpool John Moores University, Byrom Street, Liverpool, L3 3AF, UK
T: +44 (0) 151 231 2105 **F:** +44 (0) 151 207 4594 **W:** www.ljmu.ac.uk/cmp **E:** cms-admissions@ljmu.ac.uk



School of **Computing and Mathematical Sciences**

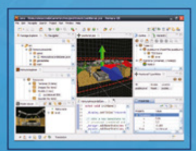
// GAMES RESEARCH

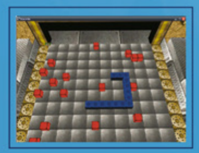










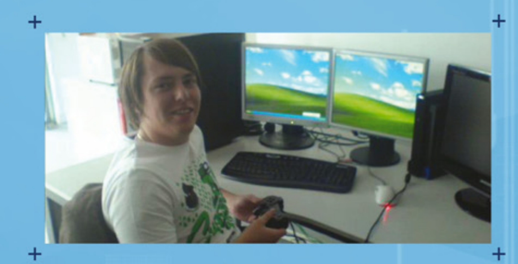


Our Games Research Group develops and applies new game technologies, methods and algorithms to a range of problems. The group has internationally recognised expertise in game development, middleware and engine development, online game development and deployment, Peer-to-Peer (P2P) technologies, applied Artificial Intelligence, interaction techniques between real and virtual environments, serious games technologies applied to education and training and digital interactive storytelling. A central theme of the group's work is technology leverage - the provision of software tools and technologies that allow techniques to be developed, integrated and used effectively for a range of applications.

The group has a strong interest in P2P technologies, and in particular how it could be used to support development of large-scale MMOG, looking at the issues of architecture, design, protocols, scalability, communication and state consistency. The group has extensive experience in Artificial Intelligence and how they can be used to solve a very large number of problems using the latest AI technologies based on RBS, CSP, Genetic Algorithms and other meta-heuristics techniques. Some new hybrid approaches have been developed and used in projects for emotional NPC societies and in digital interactive storytelling.

The group has applied this experience in a number of collaborative projects with local games companies and bigger partners such as the BBC, leading to the development of the Homura Game Engine and NetHomura, a networked game middleware supporting the development and online deployment of Multiplayer Online Games. The outcomes of these research projects are being used in the development of new course materials for our postgraduate courses.

// SUCCESS STORIES



Andrew Simpson, Bizarre Creations
BSc (Hons) Computer Games Technology Graduate 2008

When the time came to choose a degree course at the age of 18 there was only one thing on my mind, computer games! Liverpool John Moores University was offering a BSc (Hons) in Computer Games Technology, with a great learning environment and excellent facilities including a games development room and the opportunity to develop on consoles, there was only one question on my mind: How do I enrol?

During my time at LJMU I gained the key skills and foundations I needed to build a career in the games industry. Within a year of graduating the first title that I worked on, Ice Age 3: Dawn of the Dinosaurs, was released on 5 platforms around the world. I am currently working on a new racing title.

Creating great games is my passion and working in the industry is a dream job for me.

> "If you have a passion for games and want to get into the industry then Computer Games Technology at LJMU is the course for you"

//

Alex Dixon, Juice Games
BSc (Hons) Computer Games Technology Graduate 2009

The BSc (Hons) Computer Games Technology course gave me the focus and ability to develop my programming skills from beginner to advanced level throughout the three years of study. Ensuring that I put all my effort and passion into my coursework gave me a solid portfolio of games and projects and also gave me the determination to finish projects to a polished level which is a critical part of working in the games industry. The placement year allowed me to gain invaluable experience in the games industry and after completing the course I had a number of job offers from respected games developers in the UK.

Many of our graduates have found employment at top studios including: Euthechnyx, Rare/Microsoft, SCE London, Evolution Studio, EA Guildford, EA/Maxis and EA Vancouver, Blitzgames, Backbone Software, Bizarre Creations, Travellers Tales Games, Juice Games, LucasArts, Foundation 9 Entertainment, Ready At Dawn Studios, Game Media, Onteca, Brain in a Jar, Jagex, Eurocom and amongst others.



Next-generation AI

How videogame industry addict Paul Kruszewski's second middleware company is tackling the wisdom of crowds


Paul Kruszewski, founder and president of Grip Entertainment

The dividing line between enthusiasm for the videogame industry and outright addiction is a blurry one at the best of times. Despite never having made a game in his life, **Paul Kruszewski** is a self-confessed sufferer of the latter affliction. Indeed, his dirty little secret is that as much as he loves games, his real passion is the technology that underpins them.

"I love games. I love this industry. I'm addicted like everyone else," he explains. "This is where the most exciting technology is."

Kruszewski's area of expertise is one of the industry's most specialist disciplines: artificial intelligence. Having founded his first middleware company, BioGraphic Technologies, which released its successful AI.implant product in 2000, he eventually sold out to industrial and military simulation company Presagis in 2007. Now, however, Kruszewski is back in play, and thinking about new ways to tackle game AI.

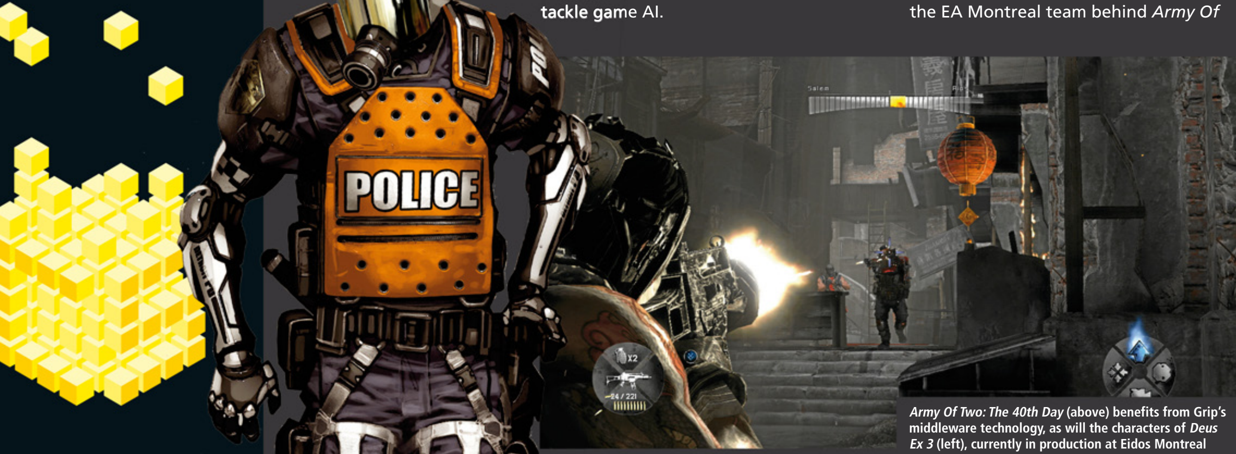
"DES represents a paradigm shift compared to the way we used to build NPCs"

"When I left Presagis I was adamant I wasn't going to do middleware again," Kruszewski laughs when the subject of his reappearance with new concern Grip Entertainment is brought up. "It's like one of these movies where you're trying to leave the mob and they keep asking you back for one last job."

Together with Aaron Davey, his director of operations at Presagis, Grip was set up in the autumn of 2007 as what the partners refer to as a next-generation middleware provider. "I think it's been proved the way to create successful middleware is to develop it as close as possible to games," Kruszewski explains. "You can't be a technology company, make your product and then try to get games companies to use it. You have to align your development process alongside the people who make games. Our technology has improved so much as we've worked with our first customers."

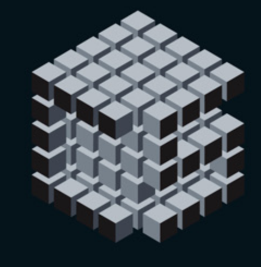
Using his experience in the industry – AI.implant sold to dozens of studios including those within Midway, EA, Eidos, BioWare, Sierra and 2K Games – Kruszewski was quick to hook up with old friends in the Montreal development scene, where Grip is based.

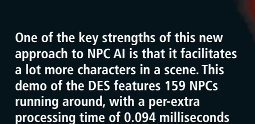
This resulted in stints working with the EA Montreal team behind *Army Of*



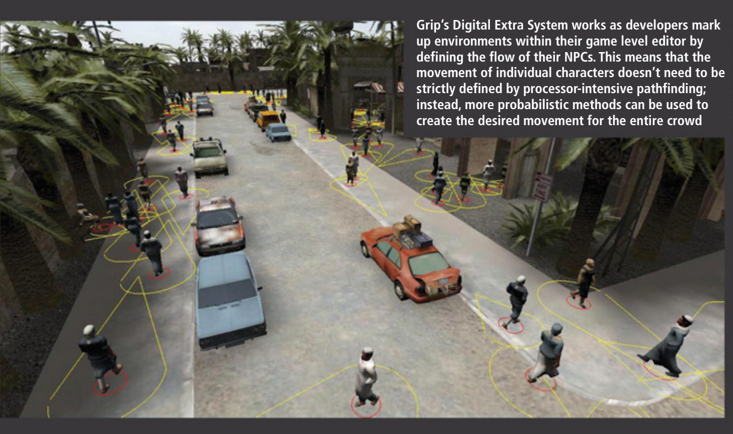
Army Of Two: The 40th Day (above) benefits from Grip's middleware technology, as will the characters of *Deus Ex 3* (left), currently in production at Eidos Montreal







One of the key strengths of this new approach to NPC AI is that it facilitates a lot more characters in a scene. This demo of the DES features 159 NPCs running around, with a per-extra processing time of 0.094 milliseconds







Grip's Digital Extra System works as developers mark up environments within their game level editor by defining the flow of their NPCs. This means that the movement of individual characters doesn't need to be strictly defined by processor-intensive pathfinding; instead, more probabilistic methods can be used to create the desired movement for the entire crowd

Two: The 40th Day to implement the company's Digital Extra System: a way of quickly creating large in-game crowds.

Grip's other technology is its Character Control System. "You can tell we're engineers because of the nomenclature," Kruszewski says. Currently being used by the Eidos team developing *Deus Ex 3*, it's also been implemented by Intel's Project Offset team. Kruszewski defines the development process for the Digital Extra and Character Control Systems as being more like a co-development deal than the old-style middleware 'sell 'em a licence' model.

"In the past, I think one of the reasons people didn't buy middleware is there are hidden integration and maintenance costs. We're open enough to say that we will take on those tasks and do the engine and level editor integration and get the key scenes up and running on a consultancy level," he says. "Effectively, we're a boutique studio, working on high-profile and very hard stuff."

The inspiration behind the Digital Extra System came from Kruszewski's previous work in non-player character artificial intelligence. "DES is a paradigm shift compared to the way we used to build NPCs," he says. "When you're trying to solve a problem, delineating what you are trying to solve and what you're not trying to solve is half the battle. NPCs are super-expensive in terms of processor requirements and you can't have very many of them."

In contrast, Grip's approach is to go for lots of characters by changing the way the AI works. "Our internal metric was to enable ten times the number of NPCs for the same processing cost; around one millisecond on an Xbox 360," Kruszewski says. "You can't get into a complex firefight with these guys, or have a complex conversation, but because we're not shoehorning a complex pathfinding algorithm into a crowd simulation system to get the characters moving through the world, we can have lots of them."

The trick is to treat the crowd as a crowd, not as a group of individuals. In this way, you don't have to worry about what each individual is doing. In fact, DES is focused more on the environment the crowd is operating within than the characters. "We have this cool piece of tech we call the flow system," explains Kruszewski. "It's integrated into the game level editor and the designer marks up areas depending on how they want the crowd to move."

The advantage of this is that the visual flow of characters can be easily seen and modified. If you want more NPCs in a certain area, you just increase the size of the flow node. "Imagine trying to do this with a goal-based system where you're trying to generate more desire for NPCs to go into that location," Kruszewski says. "It's easy to use and that's what's vital for game developers."

Of course, the other side of game development is that all systems have to potentially integrate with each other, so if circumstances demanded it the Digital Extra System could be linked up with standard pathfinding AI.

Indeed, *Army Of Two: The 40th Day* also used AI.implant, the middleware from Kruszewski's previous company, for more complex NPC behaviour. But that's the past in more ways than one, he argues. "We're taking AI beyond pathfinding and not only that, we're outsourcing it too," he enthuses. "People, including me, always thought AI was too gameplay-related for that approach to work, but from a business point of view that's exactly what we're doing. We license software and provide a bunch of services. And, so far, people are liking it."

Is the actor happy?

As well as its Digital Extra System, Grip Entertainment's other technology is the equally prosaically named Character Control System. It's a behaviour tree system which defines what a game character does in any situation, combined with a visual user interface that enables programmers and designers to define how they want the game to work.

"The biggest challenge in character AI is the interface between the designer, who typically isn't technical, and the programmer," Kruszewski explains. "Our system enables you to express the decision logic in a behaviour tree but in an explicit way so that non-technical people can read it and understand an NPC's decision-making process." Hence, once the flow of the character actions are agreed on, the programmer can get down to rewriting the nodes of the behaviour tree as the Character Control System is integrated directly into the game engine.

www.gripent.com

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev



COMPANY NAME: Stainless Games Ltd

DATE FOUNDED: 1994

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 40

KEY STAFF: Patrick Buckland (CEO), Matt Edmunds (COO), Shaun Smith (creative director), Ben Gunstone (production director), John Cook (business development)



URL: www.stainlessgames.com

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY: *Magic: The Gathering – Duels Of The Planeswalkers*, *Red Baron Arcade*, *EA Scrabble*, *Happy Tree Friends*, *Carmageddon 1 & 2*







Once known for *Carmageddon*, Stainless has also produced *Risk: Factions* (top) and *Red Baron Arcade* (centre) from its Isle of Wight base (above)



LOCATION: Isle of Wight, UK

CURRENT PROJECTS: Further *Magic: The Gathering* work; *Risk: Factions* for XBLA; plus undisclosed console download and iPhone titles

ABOUT THE STUDIO:

"Founded by industry veteran Patrick Buckland and graphic design guru Neil Barnden in the early '90s, Isle of Wight-based Stainless Games is an established UK developer whose most recent success is the number one bestseller *Magic The Gathering: Duels Of The Planeswalkers*, which on its release last June was the fastest-selling game ever on Xbox Live Arcade, and immediately occupied the number one position in the XBLA sales charts.

"Although Stainless currently has some 12 Xbox Live Arcade games either released or in production, the firm remains unwilling to be typecast and has created titles in many genres in recent years, on platforms including the PS3, PSP, DS and PC – for some of the world's largest names such as EA, Hasbro, Sega and Disney.

"The company boasts strong design skills and state-of-the-art technology where it really counts – such as the advanced AI and over-the-net mentoring systems of *Duels Of The Planeswalkers*, the physics of *Novadrome*, and the polygon-perfect action-replay system of *Carmageddon*.

"Much of this has been made possible by Stainless Games' ongoing investment in its state-of-the-art crossplatform technology, which enables rapid prototyping and development of a game on all main hardware platforms and – with many titles being released on multiple platforms – greatly reduces the 'per platform' cost of development.

"Led from the front by Buckland and the rest of the management team, Stainless is a close-knit company enjoying a solid 'work hard, play hard' ethic in a structured yet relaxed and fun environment."



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Tech profile

A closer look at the tools of the trade

PRODUCT NAME: CryEngine 3

DEVELOPER: Crytek

URL: mycryengine.com

As Crytek unveils its latest game production (see p46), we talk to the company's **Carl Jones** about the integrated technology powering its first multiplatform title.

One of the key elements of CryEngine 3 is What You See Is What You Play – what does the feature mean in practice? Is it genuinely unique?
When you consider that *everything* in CryEngine 3 can be modified in realtime, with the ability to simultaneously edit and play your creation, we're confident that it's unique, yes. Removing all downtime from a development pipeline has an enormous impact on the speed of iteration and content creation, plus the amount of tweaking and polishing you can do in realtime, so ultimately it can result in better games, more quickly.

To what types of games do you think CryEngine 3 is best suited? Does it happily scale from the smallest projects up to the biggest MMOGs?
It's flexible enough to support various genres – it's not an uber-engine offering everything, but it's as close as it gets. You'll always have to tweak or extend something to your needs, because games live by their unique features. But unlike other engines that limit you to a closed environment, CryEngine was always made to support an open world with sandbox-style development. You can very easily load a *Crysis* level into the sandbox editor, use our road tool to place a racetrack, and the terrain will be automatically smoothed to fit the track. If you add one of the *Crysis* cars, you're done with your simple prototype.

Apart from multiplatform support, what are the other most significant changes in CryEngine 3?
The key is that it's an all-in-one solution – AI, physics, networking and multiplayer, audio and high-end effects are all included within the engine and built solely for CryEngine 3. It's being used especially on triple-A games in development, and the tools and functionality have been designed and built to ease development across multiple platforms. We've increased realtime development – our What You See Is What You Play tool design now applies to all platforms, simultaneously. We also added LiveCreate functionality to all pipelines and development processes, which makes CryEngine 3 100 per cent realtime. This way, there are no delays to developers seeing their creations in-game because there's no pre-calculation or loading times.

In terms of where we're going with CryEngine 3 in our own games, with *Crysis 2* we're aiming to set the graphical benchmark on all three platforms. We know it's a big challenge but we're looking forward to meeting – and hopefully exceeding – gamers' expectations.

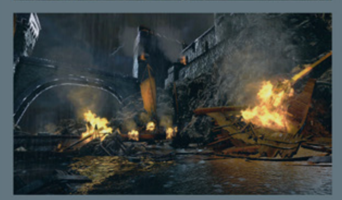
Just how prolific can we expect CryEngine 3 to be over the coming years? Are we talking about Unreal Engine levels of interest?
Our intention is to ensure that all CryEngine 3 titles are world-class in quality, so we give our licensees a considerable amount of dedicated support to help them achieve their vision. Obviously this limits the number of developers we can support effectively, so we won't be looking for 100+ developers to take the engine this year!


Carl Jones, director of biz dev, CryEngine

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Since its inception, CryEngine has always excelled at simulating natural-looking environments, and the third iteration further advances what is possible in realtime (top). However, Crytek's demos also emphasise what its technology can do with urban environments, and its support for fine facial detail

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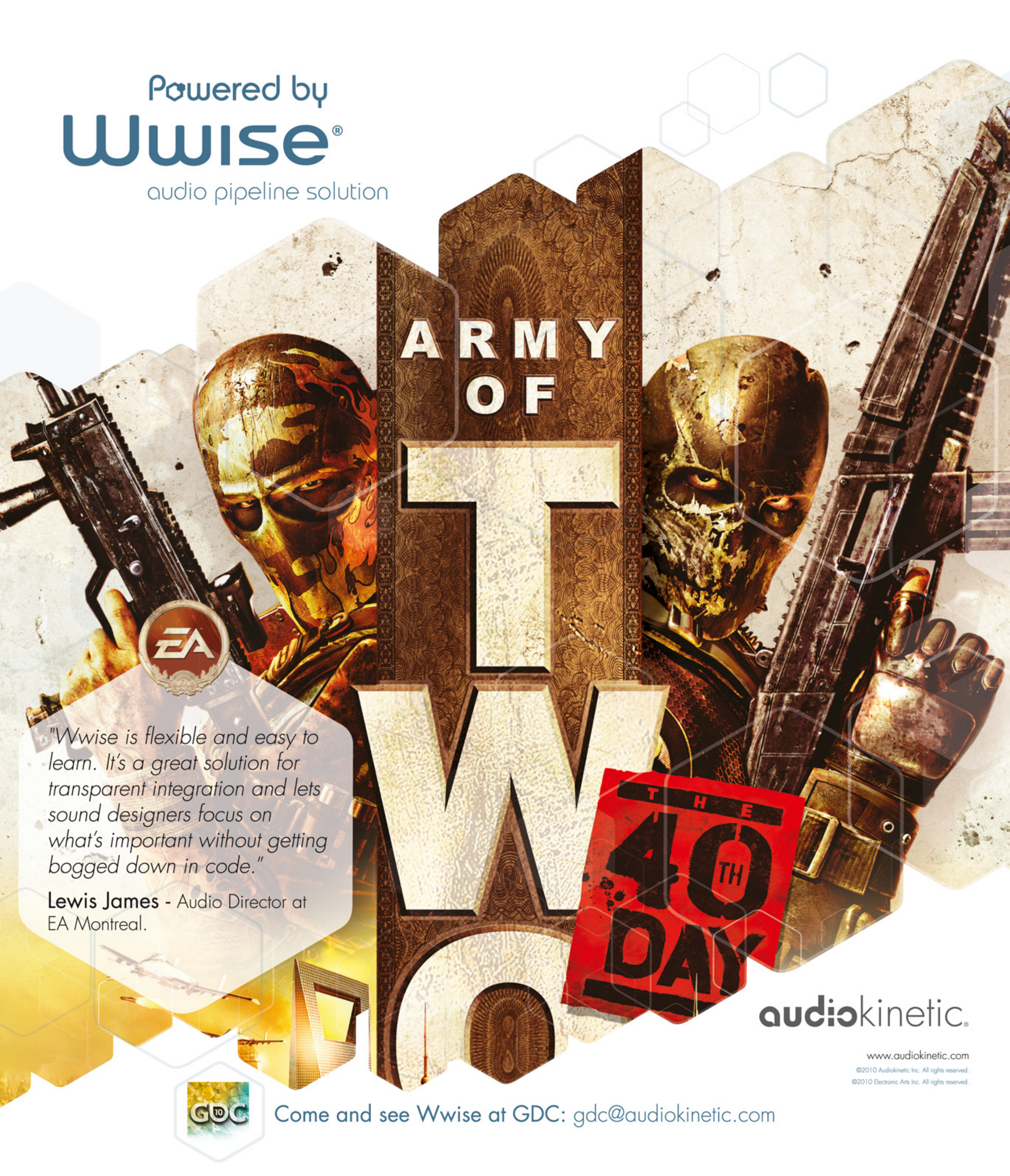
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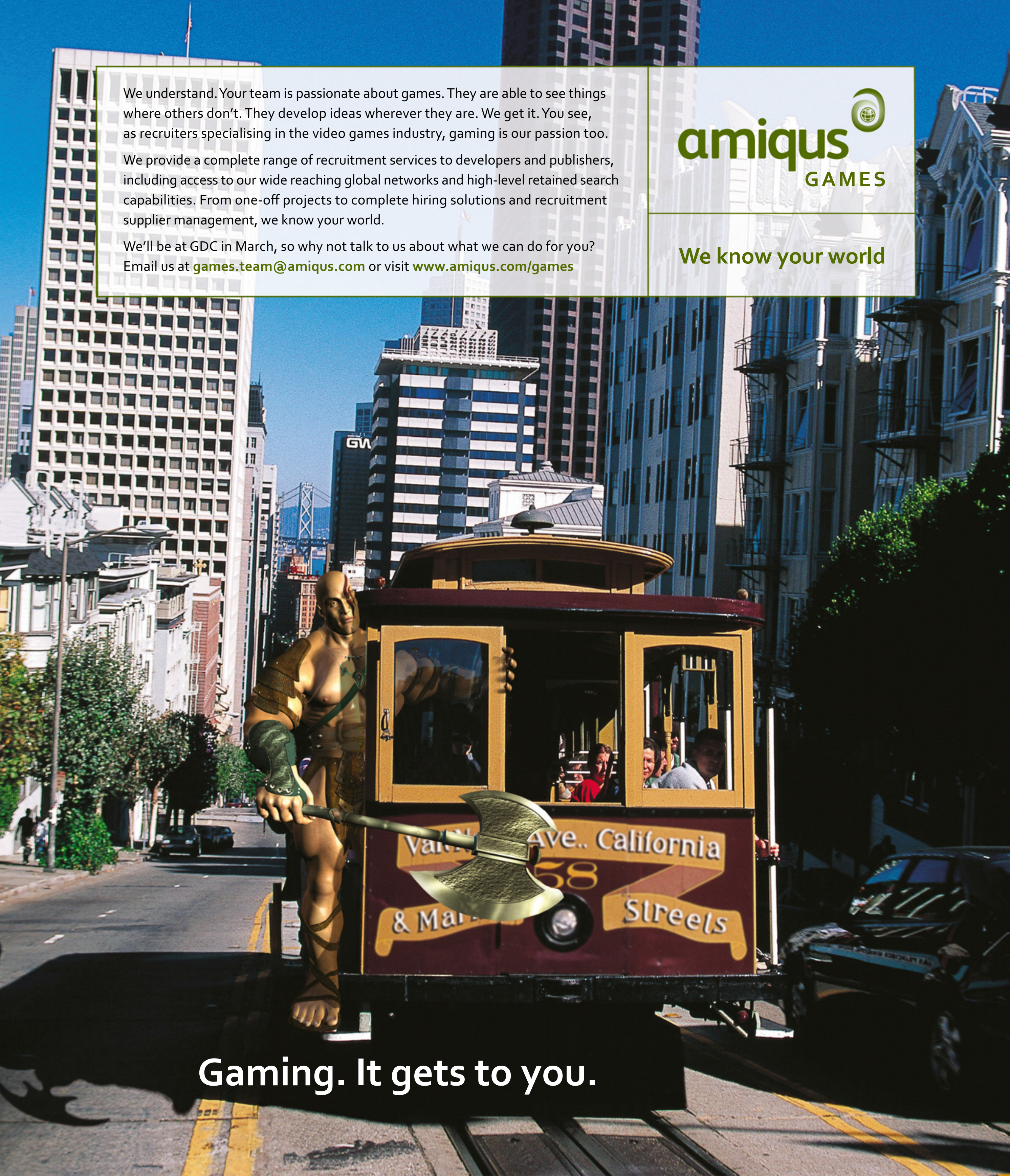


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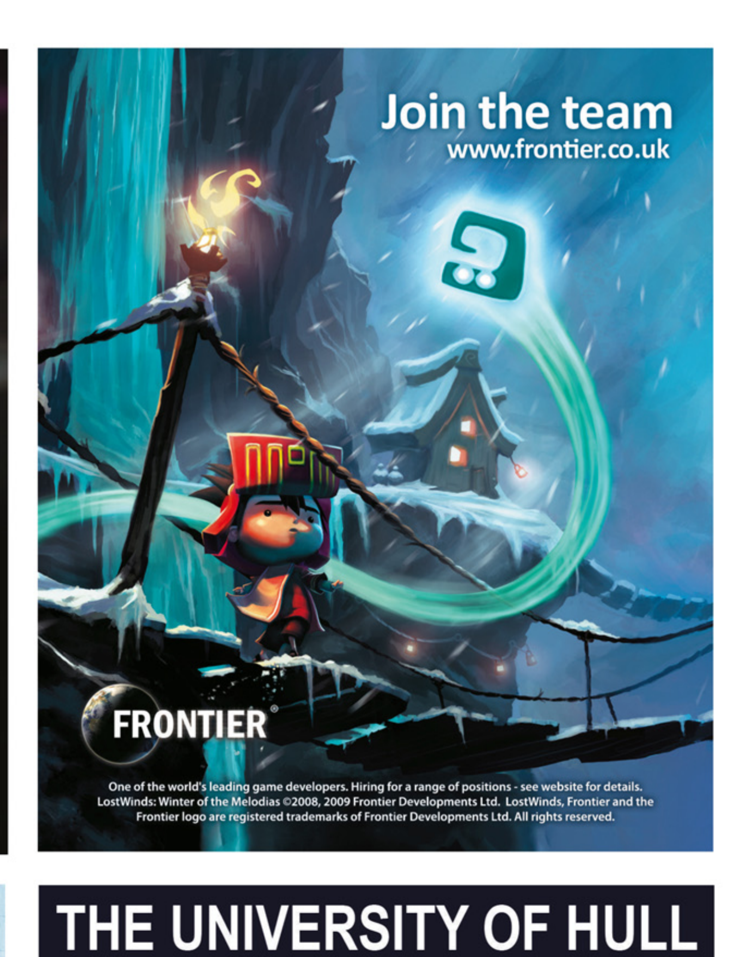
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Manuele Bonanno: MSc Graduate 2008

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HI, I'M RANDY Videogame design, etc

Writing about dancing about architecture

BY RANDY SMITH

I bought two albums today: Vampire Weekend's Contra and the Yeah Yeah Yeahs' It's Blitz! They are both solid albums that demonstrate each band's range. Contra seems a bit different than Vampire Weekend's eponymous debut, lacking a bit of the rustic charm I found disarming. It's Blitz! is less reckless than earlier Yeah Yeah Yeahs material.

The word 'rustic' evokes cabins in the woods and pails of milk. Yet you can kind of see how the word applies: Vampire Weekend has a sweet innocence and an organic sound that could easily have been recorded at home, and those are the types of values we assume cabin-dwelling cow milkers aspire to. By contrast, Contra layers in a bit of mathematical precision and electronic sounds which are far at odds with these 'rustic' designations.

So these words are attempting to capture some nuance of the work, imprecisely, poetically. This is "dancing about architecture", trying to describe one medium with another. The full quote is "talking about music is like dancing about architecture", and its attribution has been lost to history. Note that it doesn't claim dancing is an impossible way to describe architecture. I think it's more a warning about the limitations of words, or a celebration of the uniqueness of each medium. We sometimes act like we can reproduce the meaning and value of a videogame by describing it with words, but if that were true, we wouldn't need videogames.

> "If we could reproduce the meaning and value of a videogame by describing it with words, we wouldn't need videogames"

When I said the Yeah Yeah Yeahs are reckless I meant it as a compliment. They attack their instruments with an abandon seemingly motivated as much by the sheer excitement of hitting things as traditional notions of what's 'musical'. That's really intoxicating to me, but you can imagine someone hearing 'reckless' in a bad way, like the band doesn't particularly care if its albums are any good. The same dance can leave viewers imagining very different buildings.

Words hold power. If you know a demon's True Name you can control him. If you know Rumpelstiltskin's name you don't have to give him your first-born. There is no better way to come to a complete understanding of what you mean than by explaining it to someone else. Did Vampire Weekend mean to become less 'rustic'? Did that evolve on purpose or were they not able to identify and control that quality? 'Rustic' is a bit off; it evokes something crudely fashioned and maybe weather-worn, which Vampire Weekend is not, so what's an even more True Name for this quality? Unpretentious? No, they're definitely a bit pretentious. Homespun? Turns out Pitchfork used "homespun", along with "polite", "breezy", and "antiseptic".

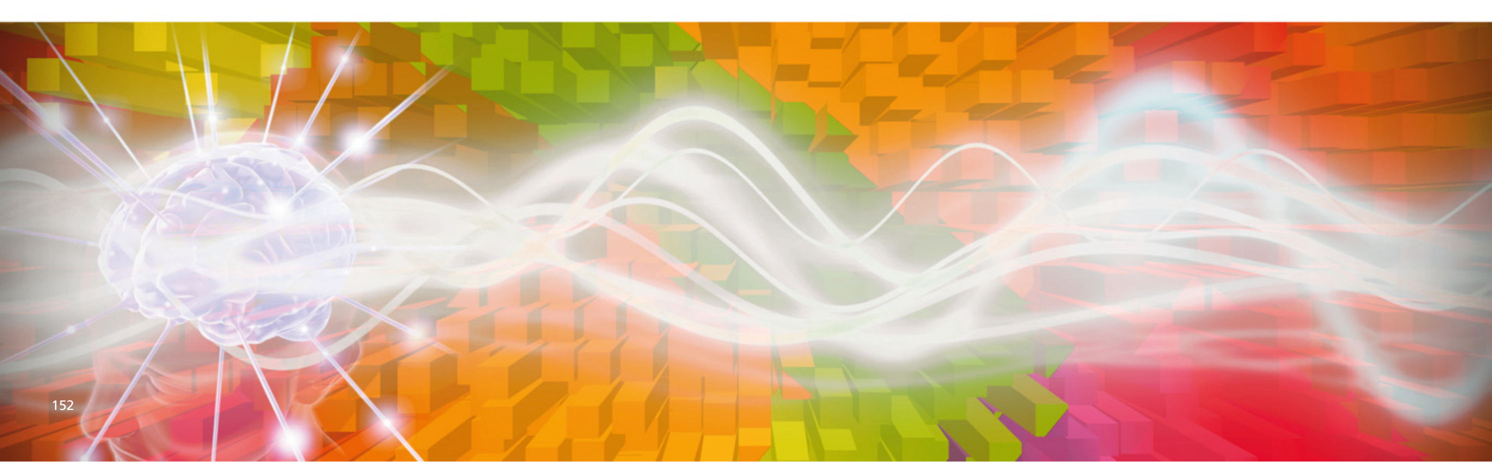
Despite all this peril, dancing about architecture is a core design proficiency, something you have to do all the time. You have some videogame concept that you wish to bring into existence that can only be expressed with complete accuracy in its native medium, that is to say after it's been created. But prior to that, unless you're a one-man shop, you have to explain to people what you want so they can help you. You need to describe it accurately, get the team's buy-in, make them excited, make sure they understand it the same way you do. You might use words, sketches, or movies. You wind up doing actual interpretive dance a little more often than the layman would suspect.

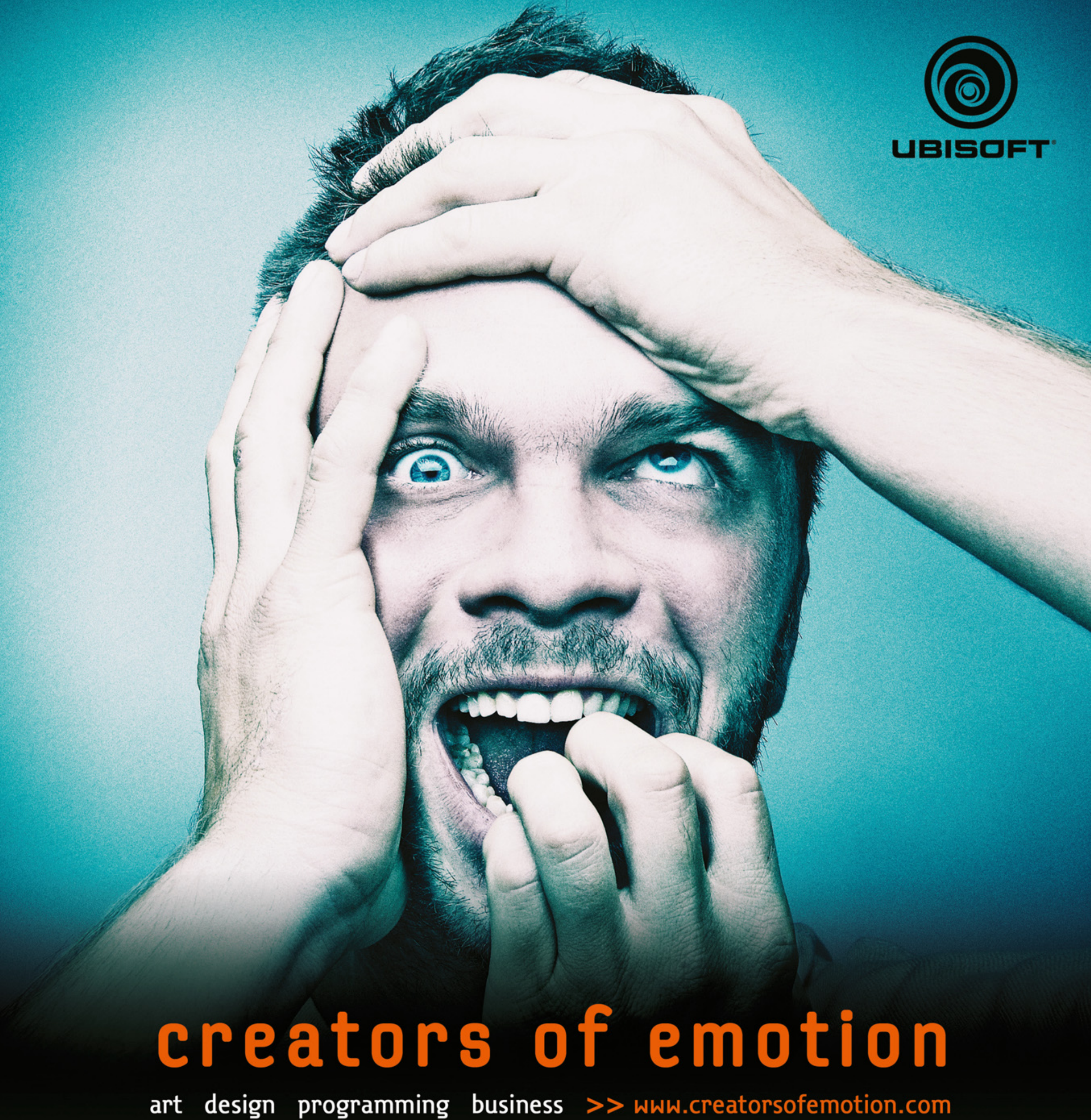
Colours can carry emotion. A blue painting can feel sad. OK, so you're staring at me like I just wasted your time with something as poignantly insightful as "the sun comes up in the morning", but it was a shock and delight for me after emerging out from under four years of technical college to experience this artistic epiphany: that the subjective world of emotions could be measured, qualified, packaged up, and transferred with artistic works, which despite their laughable imprecision would often result in other people understanding it as it was meant to be communicated. If that doesn't blow your mind at least a little bit, then you're probably a fairly right-brained person. The rest of us have to train ourselves to think this way, or maybe just unlearn enough to release our natural propensity for non-rational thought. This meeting of left and right brains is rare but necessary for game development.

Here's a time-honoured scene that I suspect will continue to recur in game development for some years. A junior designer who seems to have some creative ideas has been assigned the task of improving character movement. He's paired with a senior programmer, a stodgy, taciturn block of beard and glasses with a habit of staring at people impassively. JD draws up a seat in SP's cube. So SP hears there's something wrong with the movement model. What does JD want changed? "Uh, I guess it should be more fluid," JD says, glancing around nervously. Microsoft Visual Studio is open on SD's screen, colourful and cryptic blocks of pound signs and brackets. SD takes off his glasses and rubs his suddenly furrowed brow. "What does 'fluid' mean?" SD asks.

What indeed.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style, whose first game, Spider, *is available now for iPhone and iPod Touch*





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TRIGGER HAPPY Shoot first, ask questions later

What is a point of view?

BY STEVEN POOLE

In videogames we largely use descriptions of point of view as merely a generic marker: this is a firstperson shooter, that is a thirdperson actioner, and so on. But there is a long history of creative changes to point of view in other artforms, through which the spectator or reader is placed in a challengingly different relationship to the reported action. Point of view is not just a perspective; it's a particular relationship to an imagined world.

Every now and then, someone tries the trick of writing a novel in the second person singular: referring to the hero not as "I" or "he" but as "you". Examples include Jay McInerney's Bright Lights, Big City (first line: "You are not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning"), and Iain Banks's Complicity (first line: "You hear the car after an hour and a half"). The title of Complicity is as much a description of the character of the chosen literary device as it is a signal of the fictional theme. An author writing skillfully in the second person can indeed draw the reader into involuntary complicity with events and actions that then come to seem too close for comfort.

> "In addressing the player as "you", the text adventure preserves an explicit separation between player and gameworld"

Our long familiarity with the classic text adventure has perhaps helped to obscure the strangeness of the fact that they, too, were most often written in the second person. This cannot have been the only obvious choice for William Crowther, author of *Colossal Cave Adventure*, aka ADVENT (1975-6), which begins: "You are standing at the end of a road before a small brick building". How might the genre have been different if it had instead read: "I am standing at the end of a road..."? That would have been a closer verbal analogue to today's ubiquitous FPS viewpoint; instead, in addressing the player as "you", the text adventure preserves an explicit separation between player and gameworld, casting the computer system itself as a separate character, an automated dungeon master through conversation with whom the journey unfolds.

What is happening, by comparison, in videogames such as *Forbidden Siren*, when the player is suddenly given a flash of himself from an unseen enemy's perspective; or in *Phantom Hourglass*, when you meet the boss Crayk and realise, in a delirious moment of joyous discombobulation, that you must fight while watching Link through the monster's eyes? These, too, are creative uses of the secondperson point of view: an underutilised effect, but one with enormous potential power.

What about the firstperson plural, the point of view of "we"? This may sound alien to videogames, but consider a squad shooter that shows a tactical map of all your soldiers: that is arguably a firstperson plural view. A different way of attempting the same perspective occurs in *Modern Warfare 2*, which is primarily a firstperson shooter both generically and aesthetically, but strives also to be a fiction in the firstperson plural. To mitigate the player's alienation at playing a confusing variety of grunts around the globe, the interstitial briefing scenes, with their bird's-eye view of troop dispensations and satellite imagery, and the chatter of commanders, attempt to glue together the disparate kinetic set-pieces with a representation of the community of "us" (which of course mainly means, according to the game's unreflective cultural imperialism, "I and my fellow Americans").

The other main contemporary generic descriptor, "thirdperson", brushes over a greater variety of viewpoints. The over-the-shoulder perspective of *Gears Of War* or *Uncharted 2* is closest in literary analogy to the Flaubertian "style indirect libre", in which narration occurs in the third person but is inflected by the thoughts and observations of the character in focus at the time. This is not the same as the "third person" of the original *Metal Gear Solid* or of a standard side-scrolling platformer, closer in spirit to what we have come to think of as the "standard" objective thirdperson narrative (though that is itself a relatively recent literary invention). And then there is the godlike thirdperson view that casts the player as a Central Scrutiniser, able to toy with the very fabric of the game universe: in this way, the stunningly simple web Flash game Continuity is a kind of Borgesian fantasy come to pixellated life.

Of course, that's not to say these distinctions between points of view have never occurred to game designers before. Indeed, an entire thesis on their psychophysiological effect is crammed into the beginning of every level of *GoldenEye*, when you see Bond in the third person and then are catapulted, with a rush of the ontological uncanny, right inside his skull. Now you are Bond. Which demonstrates, again, the general truth: not all points of view are equal, and videogames could play more creatively with their differences.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at stevenpoole.net



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BY N'GAI CROAL

PLAYING IN THE DARK ...because people refuse to see

3D-ing is believing

Officially, the 2010 edition of the annual Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas began on January 7. Unofficially, however, the show kicked off the moment that James Cameron's record-breaking hit Avatar landed in cinemas around the globe. Anyone who was paying attention to the pre-show buzz for CES knew that 3D TV sets were going to be heavily hyped at the event. But there was a certain doubtfulness that accompanied the advance coverage, an underlying assumption that TV manufacturers were simply making a cash grab. That, having finally persuaded a number of us to dig into our wallets for HDTVs, those CEOs were merrily licking their lips at the prospect of convincing us to do so all over again for the privilege of watching sitcoms in 3D.

Avatar changed all of that. Mostly. There are still a number of naysayers, but the volume on their scepticism has been turned down. And if I were to hazard a guess, I'd say that it has a lot to do with how Cameron made use of the z-axis. Those of us who watched 3D flicks like My Bloody Valentine or The Final Destination in the PCE (Pre-Cameron Era) were accustomed to it being used in a gimmicky manner, with some object inevitably being propelled towards the audience at great speed. Rather than use 3D to have the screen assault the audience, Cameron uses it to pull us further into the image than we've ever been.

> "My brief experience with 3D at CES was enough to persuade me that this format will have a role to play in videogames"

It was this that convinced me that this format has a role to play in videogames. And, having seen the movie twice in December alone (once in regular 3D and once in IMAX 3D), I went to CES in Las Vegas with a mind that had been blown open by the possibilities, and curious to see how game developers might take advantage of this new canvas. And since Sony had an array of 3D television sets and PS3s in its booth, I decided to start my investigation there, skipping the 3D movie demos and heading straight for the games.

I'd heard that Housemarque and Sony's twin-stick shooter *Super Stardust HD* was in the booth, so I waited my turn, then went glasses-on as the game was being demoed. The first thing that I noticed was that the distance between the planet and the playable surface was more pronounced. Also, the asteroids themselves protruded appropriately from the forcefield surrounding the planets, as did the explosions when the asteroids were being destroyed. Finally, at the end of each sub-stage, when the player's spacecraft would fly towards the camera and back to the forcefield, it felt like it was coming out of the screen. Nothing too over-the-top; just a simple re-rendering of an already fantastic game in 3D which, thanks to its layers of depth, managed to look fresh and new even though it played identically to the original.

By contrast, the demonstration of the newest instalment in Sony's pro-baseball franchise showed not only the strengths of 3D, but also some of the pitfalls that will need to be addressed not only by game developers, but TV producers as well. The view from behind the catcher was phenomenal in the way that it communicated a sense of depth – I might have liked a slightly more pronounced depth-of-field effect, but apart from that I was impressed. However, when the batter hit the ball and proceeded to run to base, the wider-angle shot of the entire field didn't have much depth to it. This, by the way, was not unique to *MLB 10: The Show*; while watching Avatar, I noticed that there were shots that looked much closer to 2D than 3D. My guess is that a wide view of the field doesn't compose the shot in a way that will communicate depth as well as having the catcher, batter and pitcher all lined up at various distances from the camera. But I can't be sure.

The biggest challenge for 3D games – one of them, anyway – is that there isn't much that can be done when there's no 3D information at all. That's what happened with the onscreen graphics in *MLB 10*, which provided information about the players, score updates, etc. Because these graphics only exist in 2D – as opposed to the 3D models for the players, their equipment and the stadium – and because they're being laid on top of a game that is being displayed in 3D, the net effect was as if someone had laid ultra-thin stickers on top of the TV screen. It was definitely distracting, and I suspect that for next year's edition, Sony will either add a bit of depth to *MLB*'s existing graphics package, or create an entirely new set of onscreen graphics that have been designed for 3D. And expect sports broadcasters to do the same.

My brief experience with 3D at CES was enough to persuade me that this format will have a role to play in videogames. I'm still wondering how developers of first- and thirdperson shooters will handle targeting reticules in games – probably projecting it on to the targets, much like laser targeting in real life – but if TV manufacturers can convince enough of us to buy in, those developers who want their work shown off to best advantage will find it hard to resist opening the Pandora's box that James Cameron has placed in their path.

N'Gai Croal is a writer and videogame design consultant. You can follow him online at ncroal.tumblr.com





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Inbox



Issue 211



ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum
forum.edge-online.co.uk

Topic: Vanquish

Not the car, the new game from Platinum games. Hopefully it will still be pretty crazy in a Japanese sort of way, and not just another space marine shooter, eh?
Franjipane

***MadWorld* looked awesome but was a bit dull. *Bayonetta* looked shit but was awesome. This looks shit and therefore ergo subsequently will thus consequently hence be awesome. My favourite bit was when the marine was playing with flowers and he got up and his suit said 'ARSE' on it.**
moonkeh

Wait, we mocked *Bayonetta*, and it turned out to be awesome. So yeah, this will be shit.
Diluted Dante

Have you guys read Shinji Mikami's CV? There's no way this'll be shit.
Curtis

He didn't do anything on teh Amiga so he doesn't count.
ResidentDrivel

First, I would like to thank **Edge** for an in-depth review of my book A Casual Revolution in the 2009 Christmas issue [**E**209]. Apart from pointing out some errors I should have caught when proofreading and which are duly noted on the book's website, **Edge** raises the important question about whether we should discuss the stereotypes of 'casual' and 'hardcore' at all. As I read it, **Edge** resents the terms 'casual' and 'hardcore' as such, maybe making the point that more simplistic stereotypes are not what we need at this point. If that's the case, then we are clearly on the same page. In the book, I trace the history of the hardcore/casual terms in an attempt to build a more detailed framework for discussing the these categories play a very real role in the development and consumption of videogames, meaning that even if we accept a more nuanced framework for talking about games and players, we still need to refer to casual/hardcore to be able to talk about current developments. For example, I compare the box art of *Gears Of War* and *Wii Sports* (not *Bejeweled* as stated in the review) to show that the games called 'casual' tend to have positive fictions. This is a generalisation that makes it possible to talk about casual games and players. As noted, fiction does not apply to an abstract game like *Solitaire*. The point is that once we have a framework for talking about such issues, we get the opportunity to

No one really likes the casual/hardcore categories. The challenge, then, is to accept that these categories play a very real role in the consumption of games

interplay between videogames, their players and developers.

In this framework, casual/hardcore is not an either/or question but consists of the four sub-components of fiction, game knowledge required, time investment, and difficulty. This allows me to talk about how a game design can be more or less open to different types of playing. You cannot, of course, reduce all of game design to four components, but the challenge of this book was to hit a sweet spot between oversimplifying and making a model so complex that no one could remember it. In short, this was my choice for how to structure the book.

As the **Edge** review seems to show, and as is documented in the developer interviews in the book, no one really likes the casual/hardcore categories. The challenge, then, is to accept that discuss why a given game doesn't cleanly match the categories.

Another choice I made was to use the personal stories of players and developers to build the arguments in the book. I think this adds some readability and certain perspectives that would have been missing if the book was entirely driven by statistics (which would have created text such as the following: "During the 1990s there was an 84 per cent increase in funds allocated to playtesting").

The review taught me that I may have underestimated the extent to which referencing common terms like casual and hardcore has the downside of bringing all their problematic meanings right back into the reading. That's a valuable insight, but I still think it is worthwhile to bring the stereotypes into play and to examine



Letter of the month wins a DSi

what is behind the stereotypes. My aim from the start was to make the book readable by telling the history of casual games by way of concrete player and developer stories, and to propose a way of talking about those pesky terms – casual and hardcore – without oversimplifying and ignoring the ongoing discussions of players and developers, and in publications such as **Edge** magazine.
Jesper Juul

After reading my way through my latest edition of **Edge** [**E**211], I found myself at that familiar but variable concluding piece, Inbox. I was surprised to see that the first three letters contained criticisms of the magazine. I would like to take a brief moment to praise you for printing critical letters, as I imagine that such an undertaking takes a sense of humility and maturity that is rarely seen in gaming publications.

However, I digress. It was a letter from Tristan May concerning the validity of **Edge**'s review scores that provoked my thinking, and in turn persuaded me to ponder what weight modern gamers put on review scores, or even an average review score taken from many individual reviewers. It is not uncommon to see advertisements



for games, whether they be in a material or digital form, plastered with numbers taken from various different sources, claiming to validate the purchase of said game. Yet, a quick scroll through the game's scores on Metacritic will most likely show that, despite there being a 90 per cent on the box of the game, the individual scores will range from 60 per cent, or perhaps lower.

With this diversity of opinion in mind, it is impossible to determine which review score will reflect your personal experience entirely, if any of them at all. Indeed, I have found myself enjoying games that have been widely criticised (*God Hand* springs to mind), and loathing some that have received universal praise. I personally believe that it is hazardous to form our perceptions of a game through such an abstract, non-specific and non-descriptive medium.

My main objection I have in regards to Mr May's letter, however, is that he refers to **Edge**'s scores seemingly as independent measures of quality. I find that in **Edge**, the numbers are completely secondary to the words. In fact, without bearing in direct relation to the words within the review, the review scores hold very little meaning. They are Snake's bandanna, Mario's moustache and Sackboy's buttons. Important details, perhaps, but rather meaningless, and spiritless, without first observing everything they are attached to.

Matthew Leigh

Perhaps we need to spell out the comparative amounts of effort that go into coming up with the words in a review and the little number between one and ten at the end. We could arrange it as some form of graph made up of words and numbers. Then, of course, certain readers could take notice of only the digits there, too.



I was very much amused to read a letter in your latest issue [**E**211] in which a correspondent criticised **Edge**'s review scores for not fitting in with everyone else. Now, consensus and the wisdom of crowds can be very powerful tools, but why would I want to read opinions that all agree? A good review will challenge its reader, confronting them with a viewpoint that may differ to their own rather than merely reinforcing their already-held beliefs. An opinion is always valid, whether it agrees or disagrees with your own. Welcome to the human race. You may find people have different opinions. This is normal, and nothing to be scared of. Get used to it.

L Hislop

It is impossible to determine which review score will reflect your personal experience. I've found myself enjoying games that have been widely criticised



Would *Metro 2033*'s world suit a more passive game experience? Tom Laverack encourages alternative storytelling styles



Topic: iPad

So it's now been officially announced and had I not experienced the iPhone I wouldn't think that this was big gaming news.
PermiaN

There are, in time, going to be some games that are absolutely brilliant on this. None of the ones they've showcased so far though.
Jmichaelwood

***NFS Shift*'s brilliant on the iPhone, you know.**
Frisbee

This thing is massive, where are you expecting people to game on it?
MattyJ

At home... on the couch... while you install a game to your Xbox hard drive. It has a place on the train or the plane – but you're going to look like a creep if you're using an A4-sized laptop as a steering wheel on the 7.45 to Staines.
Google.

Being somewhat of a Mac convert, due to the missus having a MacBook I use all the time, I'm thinking it'll be the second or third generation of this that'll be where it's at. The more I look at this sort of stuff, the more it's inevitable it'll be the standard at some point, it's just a matter of which point you want to jump on the bandwagon.
Facewon

It sounds like it could be good for the digital equivalent of magazines, but I imagine for a lot of its other features it might be a bit of a jack of all trades and a master of none. It can do video, but I have a nice TV and a laptop with HDMI output, so that doesn't interest me. It can do music, but you'll be using external speakers to get a decent sound experience and you've probably sorted yourself out for that. It can do ebooks but it's big, and doesn't have the magnetic ink readability thing of dedicated ereaders. And so on.
EvilRedEye



Does a game need great review scores across the board before you can really enjoy it? *God Hand* wasn't universally praised, but that didn't discourage Matthew Leigh

Why are so many videogames fundamentally about challenge? About trial and error, difficulty curves and 'beating' the game? I realise the word 'game' should be a clue here. But seriously, why are so many videogames just that – games?

The thing with challenge in videogames (and in general) is that it's an easy way to grab and hold a person's attention, it intrinsically motivates, and it provides a structure. It can provoke feelings of frustration, determination, relief and satisfaction. And through a challenge-based videogame you can relieve stress, or just scratch an OCD itch. But challenge on its own doesn't provide much in the way of an emotional experience (besides that outlined above), and can in fact get in the way of one.

Reading your preview of *Metro 2033* [**E**210], I was struck by what seemed a tangible sense of disappointment in the article, as you described a fascinating and original world, story and characters, being squeezed and compromised in order to fit the template of a generic firstperson shooter. Maybe the developers thought we wouldn't be interested in the world if we weren't interacting with it in a familiar way (by shooting it, beating it, or solving it).

But here's a crazy idea. Why couldn't the basis of the game – the motivation, the structure – come from the world itself: from narrative, rather than challenge? I realise that there are difficulties with implementing narrative in videogames. But even a completely linear narrative can be captivating, motivating and compelling – of course it can. And just taking on an active role in a story, rather than passively viewing it from the outside, can differentiate the

Continued

experience sufficiently from that of watching a film.

Does the idea of playing such a videogame sound dull? If so, is that an indictment of game players – or of game developers? Because I for one firmly believe it shouldn't be dull.

And all of this brings me to *Heavy Rain*. Here is a game that has been trumpeted as being all about the narrative. Sure, there is challenge in there as well, but the important point is that if you fail a particular challenge the game doesn't end. It's not about beating the game; it's about experiencing the story. That's the theory, anyway. I await the verdict with interest.
Tom Laverack

There's no doubt that *Heavy Rain*, while flawed, is something of a landmark in interactive storytelling, and we hope it'll sell enough units to encourage further experimentation, not only on the part of Quantic Dream but the wider development community. As we wait for the numbers to come in, you can amuse yourself with your new DSi.

I read with both interest and confusion Brick Bardo's article, Something About Japan [**E**211]. Brick is talking about everlasting actors, such as Ichikawa, and wondering why gaming doesn't have the equivalent. The problem is that gaming never will. The reason is not that gaming doesn't produce fantastic characters, it's just that the analogy doesn't quite add up. Ichikawa, Brad Pitt and James Dean are all actors. They bring the character to life, so they can move from film to film, genre to genre, and people will go to see them, not because it's the same character, but because of the way that actor portrays different characters. Lara Croft, however, can't drive Wario's cart throwing bananas at people because she is, well, not an actor, but a character.

It's the gamer who is the Ichikawa, Pitt or Dean. It's the gamer who gives life to the character, not the character itself. The best games are the ones you get involved in and form an attachment to because you love the way the actor portrays the character. In other words, you love how the controls and the moves work, not only in terms of the character but also how they sit within the story, narrative, and looks. If the first *Tomb Raider* was exactly the same game but with a boy-shaped bunch of polygons on the screen called Laurence Croft, it would still have been a top game. If Solid Snake was a girl, the game would still work. If *MGS5* was a Mario game, it just wouldn't. Solid Snake is a good character, but it's me that is the driving force behind him. I decide who he kills or who he sneaks past. I am the one who feels the tension as the 300-foot nuclear-powered, armour-plated robot faces me and my semi-automatic handgun. You can change the name, gender and look of a character no problem, but you can't substitute a character for one that already exists. It just wouldn't work. It would be like putting Darth Vader in Rambo, or Tyler Durden in Love Actually, or Blade in Twilight. Actually, that last one is a damn good idea…
Phil Asquith

But what about *Shenmue*'s Ryo Hazuki in *Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing*? Isn't that some kind of seismic paradigm shift right there? What's that? *No?*



Topic: Psychology in games

Anyone who's ever watched any Derren Brown will know that it's possible to force certain responses out of people given the right circumstances. For example, if you ask somebody to count backwards from 100, interrupt them after a few seconds, and then ask them to name a vegetable, they will probably say carrot (how on Earth would you find that out?). Unfortunately, this has limited use in games.

Can anyone think of a possible use for this kind of psychological trickery or a game where it has been used already? The only one I can think of is *Subliminal*. The soundtrack has hidden messages that are supposed to make you feel good while playing. I can't think of any subliminal signposting.
Freethinker

I'd be interested if they used psychology to cover over some of the limits which games have. Choice for example can throw up so many different paths that a developer simply can't cater to everyone's preferred choice in a situation. Right now you either get no choice and follow the cutscene or you enter into a choice tree. As a player you're always fully aware of your choice being limited. However, if by using tricks of the mind and suggestion it were possible to limit the vast amounts of choice available to the player down to those that would appear in a traditional tree then I reckon they would be close to the holy grail of gaming. The player would make a decision based on what they think they want to do, but in actual fact they have been manipulated into making that choice. The developer gets to restrict the choices, reducing costs, and the player gets to play the game with the belief that they are in charge.

I'd like to think someone somewhere is working out ways to do that.
ScotsWahey



Sometimes, special editions can take you closer to a game's fiction. If you're like Mervyn Robinson, however, you've had your fill of bonus trinkets

It used to be one of the perks of my gaming life: receiving my pre-ordered limited edition, replete with art books, soundtracks, 'making of' DVDs, figurines, extra content… Giving that up has become a new year's resolution, however, given the confusing mess that buying games has become. I'm tired of having to trawl the internet and check news sites just to check I'm getting everything with my game, and now that's not even possible – *BioShock 2*, for example, comes beautifully packaged with art book and (vinyl!) soundtrack, but not the downloadable characters that come with the pre-ordered 'vanilla' edition.

I also find that this habit has an effect on the games that I play: with a growing pile of outsized boxes sitting on the shelf waiting to be played, I'm less and less likely to download *Braid* or *LostWinds*, or to finally get round to playing the *Metroid Prime* trilogy; they don't come with anything, after all.

While writing this may make me sound like a case study in OCD rather than a gamer, the sheer volume of collector's/limited/special/hardened/legendary/etc editions, and the way their announcement is regarded as news by gaming sites, makes me think I'm not alone. Clearly there's a market for these things, and I'm sure they give a boost to first-week sales, but after shelling out 60 quid for *Arkham Asylum*, receiving a batarang that wouldn't be fit to grace a Happy Meal, and then seeing it for sale in HMV for £19.99, I'm out. With the advent of whole levels and game modes becoming special edition only, I hope others will follow suit.
Mervyn Robinson

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Shouldn't your game be on this list as well?



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